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The birth of a multicultural funeral home

Yvon van der Pijl

Department of Cultural Anthropology, Utrecht University, Utrecht, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT

In 2014, the Dutch Funeral Organization Yarden started with the participatory preparations for a multicultural funeral home. The project aims at a 24/7 service for the super-diverse population of Amsterdam and beyond. This article gives an ethnographic account of Yarden's efforts to capture cultural diversity. It explores how a multicultural gaze creates a power/knowledge dynamic producing new discourses and shaping new layers of significance. The study then turns into arguing that the birth of the multicultural home is, above all, a cultural, collaborative search leaving (counter-discursive) space for creativity, change, and cultural renewal of all actors involved.

Some two years ago—sitting in a coffee shop waiting—my eye was caught by a headline in *Het PAROOL*, an Amsterdam-based daily newspaper: “All types of bereavement under one roof.”¹ The short article that followed the header reported on a remarkable and rather ambitious project initiated by Yarden, one of the largest funeral companies in the Netherlands.

The company had plans for a new funeral home in Amsterdam Southeast, a council known for its super-diversity, aiming to open “the first [funeral home] in the country where all cultures can be facilitated.” In the article the responsible manager and initiator of the project, Anita van Loon (real name, with permission), outlined the function of this future funeral home: “We want it all [all cultures] together under one roof... We want to provide shelter for groups of fifty to five hundred people. There can be mourned during daytime, but also at night. We will be open seven days a week, day and night.” Further on in the newspaper article, she stressed that the implementation of the plan does not have to happen overnight. On the contrary, she argued, careful preparation is vital, as a wrong approach can lead to “groups” preferring not to use the facility. Van Loon stated, “For us it is important to know exactly what to do and what not to do.” Therefore, Yarden kicked off with a series of “information meetings” and the organization of workshops in which “different types of funerals will be acted out in the smallest details.”



After reading the article, I sensed myself being caught by two, opposing trains of thought. First, I know (principally from my Surinamese-Dutch network in Amsterdam) that there has long been a need for such

a funeral home, and that previous initiatives have failed so far. So, I applaud the project wholeheartedly. The second thought, however, was more skeptical: This is a market-driven business, so what to expect from this careful preparation, this cautious approach? Are funeral directors really prepared to invest in a time-consuming project that is sensitive to the complexities of cultural diversity, and requires, most probably, a critical stance toward the company's own organizational culture (i.e., to put it bluntly, predominantly White and monocultural)? Fascinated by the project and curious about Yarden's rationale, I decided to contact the originator and manager in charge of “the first multicultural funeral home in the Netherlands.”

The resulting, still ongoing ethnographic research aims to (a) describe and analyze Yarden's efforts to develop this funeral home and (b) interpret the company's perception of cultural diversity and mortuary ritual. This article particularly explores how the organization's multicultural gaze creates a power/knowledge dynamic producing new discourses and shaping new layers of significance. The discussion then turns into arguing that the birth of the multicultural home is, above all, a cultural, collaborative search leaving (counter-discursive) space for creativity, change, and cultural renewal of all actors involved.

Bad undertaker, good undertaker: Birthing power and creativity

Although there is no Dutch Jessica Mitford or anything that comes close to her disturbing account of

CONTACT Yvon van der Pijl  y.vanderpijl@uu.nl  Department of Cultural Anthropology, Utrecht University, Padualaan 14, 3584 CH Utrecht, the Netherlands.
¹“Alle soorten rouwverwerking onder één dak.” *Het PAROOL*, January 15, 2014.

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The American Way of Death (Mitford, 1963, 1998), public awareness of the funeral-industry profession in the Netherlands has heightened the last decades, perpetuating sometimes humorous stereotypes, and, more often, damning portrayals of the undertaker (cf. Laderman, 2003). Just as in the United States, the undertaker turned funeral director is increasingly imagined as “driven by profit and dependent on the fine art of deceit” (Laderman, 2003, p. 85). As a response, and similar to the American funeral fashion, many actors in the Dutch death care industry aim for approaches that demonstrate “the true social and personal value of their work” embracing additional roles in their ever-expanding repertoire, such as that of grief specialist (see Laderman, 2003, p. 84) and, more recently, multicultural expert. Supported by fitting public relations strategies, classy commercials, and television programs stressing the delicate art and beauty of the profession, their efforts indeed affect public reflections on the funeral industry, eventually altering existing, disapproving images and appreciations of the “average undertaker” (cf. Laderman, 2003).

We have to understand these dynamics against the background of culturally significant changes in the Netherlands from the 1960s onwards; in particular, the very influential processes of secularization, individualization, and multiculturalization of Dutch society that have resulted in changing death ways and “new ritualisations of death” (Venbrux, Peelen, & Altena, 2009). Numerous scholars observe, especially from the late 1990s, a growing experimentation and innovation in mortuary rites, often coined as ritual creativity, increasingly facilitated by “the consumer-oriented undertaking business” (Venbrux et al., 2009, pp. 97–98; see also Venbrux, Hessels, & Bolt, 2008; Venbrux, Quartier, Venhorst, & Mathijssen, 2013). In the slipstream of new ritual specialists, funeral reformers, and progressive entrepreneurs the Dutch death care industry has tapped into a widespread consumer interest creating more room for diversification and cultural pluriformity of mortuary practices. Remarkably, this goes in tandem with a “strong ideology of individualism” contributing to more personalized rituals and funerals, and simultaneously a “longing for community” (Venbrux et al., 2009, p. 99) leading to collective ritual practices, memorials, and even a revival or retraditionalization of particular death rites such as All Souls’ Day.

In turn, the innovations of mortuary ritual and new ritualizations of death increasingly receive attention in various types of media, generating growing “symbolic importance for the Dutch perception of funerary rituals” (Venbrux et al., 2009, p. 99)—whatever this “Dutch perception” may be. The small news item, with

which this article commenced, is part and parcel of this dynamic. It shows Yarden’s consumer-orientation (in its intended multicultural approach and services) and anticipates the symbolic importance that might come with it. Yet, it may also reveal the power of funeral companies and all kinds of experts to produce new discourses and shape new layers of significance.

Such power, however, differs from Jessica Mitford-like understandings, as it does not refer to the crude ingenuity of the funeral industry and its greedy salesmen to charge fees that are grossly disproportionate to the services they render. The power I refer to is subtle and not necessarily pressuring surviving relatives into agreeing to excessive standards for burial services. It rather departs from the Foucauldian idea (Foucault, 1977) that power is everywhere—diffused and embodied in discourse, knowledge, and regimes of truth—or as Gaventa (2003, p. 1) put it: “Power [according to Foucault] is diffuse rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them.”

An important feature of this view is that there is a ubiquitous interplay between power and knowledge (power/knowledge) meaning that power produces knowledge as well as that power is granted through knowledge and, in that way, constructs “truth.” Furthermore, power/knowledge is changeable in time: New types of discourse create new forms of knowledge, by which those who got the power-through-knowledge might lead discourses in preferred directions or even, according to Foucault, “regimes of truth.” It is my presumption that directors, managers, and other entrepreneurs in the funeral business can exert this particular power-through-knowledge, being able to discursively construct supposedly truthful (and also trustful) ways of dealing with death and disposal. Or as Giddens (1990) might put it: Professionals in the death care industry are experts organizing, managing, and producing specialized knowledge that can form the norms with which selves and others are measured. To illustrate and understand this particular power/knowledge dynamics I want to bring in another, though related, Foucauldian concept, namely that of “the gaze.”

In *The Birth of the Clinic* Foucault (1973) used the term *gaze*, as a specific act of seeing (i.e., scientific, clinical, and rational), to describe the creation of a new field of knowledge of the human body. Through this particular gaze, bodies did not only enter a modern field of knowledge, but also a novel field of power becoming susceptible for control, manipulation, and suchlike. Of course, it is not my intention to insinuate death care experts of purposeful acts of manipulation

or comparable undertakings per se. Rather, I want to show in what ways a specific act of seeing is recently developing in the Dutch death care industry and how this renders an intently yet also very fixed attention to the issue of cultural diversity or multiculturalism. Subsequently, I wonder if and how the resulting gaze, which I call the *multicultural gaze*, and related discourses create or produce new forms of power/knowledge.

My Foucauldian view on the birth of the funeral home, then, might suggest a very rigid approach of institution building. However, because power is everywhere, I want to stress the creativity as well as the discursive and collaborative efforts of all actors involved—from managers high up in the institutional hierarchy to caretakers on the ground, from profit-seeking undertakers to their interlocutors and (future) clients. With a frisky reference to the seminal work of the anthropologists Mintz and Price (1992), I aim to include in my analysis the very idea of creolization showing that (a) people—experts and lay persons alike—inevitably make creative use of their varied cultural backgrounds and traditions; and (b) that their cultural encounters may be imbalanced, but nevertheless productive and often innovative. Relating this idea to the work of Tsing (2005), I look at the Dutch death care landscape as a space of “awkward engagement” involving an ensemble cast of characters, with Yarden in the role of ambitious protagonist, who may or may not have common understandings and, therefore, will collaborate with a difference. I argue that the birth of the multicultural home is, therefore, a cultural search that is both formed by contingency and characterized by friction or, as Tsing defined it, by “awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” (Tsing, 2005, p. 4). Such an undertaking implies, in any manner and notwithstanding the aforementioned power play, a syncretic blend of values and ritual practices remodeling Dutch funeral fashion. As a result, the project challenges standardized patterns of interaction and prevailing perceptions of mortuary rituals as well as hegemonic discourses and ideologies (putting into place multiculturalism).

Understanding the other in death ritual: Yarden’s multicultural gaze

In *The Birth of African-American Culture* Mintz and Price argued, against the hegemonic academic viewpoint at that time, that Africans who were enslaved and shipped to the New World cannot “be said to have shared a *culture*,” having been “drawn from different parts of the African continent, from numerous ethnic and linguistic groups, and from different societies in

any region” (Mintz & Price, 1992, p. 2).² On the contrary, the anthropologists stated that the roots of African-American culture lie in the collaborative efforts of the enslaved to create a new society in the New World. They particularly had a critical stance toward the strong belief of prominent anthropologists in so-called African “retentions.” Mintz and Price argued that these supposed retentions or survivals in the cultural realm should be examined and understood in light of social structures and divergent relationships established in the Americas. Hence, African-American culture was born in the New World instead of a remainder of West-African cultural heritage and traditions. Their provocative approach blasted the, at that time, popular and very narrow Afrocentrism. Moreover, it showed that there is in unequal power relations (colonizer/colonized) always room for cultural creation, resistance, and innovation. Now, when we turn back to Yarden’s aspirations to build a funeral home that provides shelter for “all cultural groups” of Amsterdam Southeast and beyond, we might ask what we can learn from that. An important lesson evolves out of what I have called Yarden’s multicultural gaze, referring to the organization’s fixation on the distinctiveness of each so-called cultural group with its own typical baggage of cultural retentions.

In early 2014, Yarden started with the participatory preparations for the design and building of its much-desired multicultural funeral home. As mentioned, the responsible managers initiated information meetings and organized workshops in which various mortuary rituals were literally enacted. Shortly afterwards, the same managers expressed their wish to develop and offer a course to Yarden employees on multicultural death and mourning rituals in the Netherlands. After a couple of consultations they contracted me to do the job. Hence, I am involved in the project as a researcher, consultant, and teacher—something worthwhile for ethical and methodological discussion, but that is beyond the scope of this article.

In November 2014 the first course, entitled “Sterven, uitvaart & rouw in multicultureel Nederland” (“Death, Burial & Mourning in Multicultural Netherlands”), started with 22 participants who were all active within the organization of Yarden in positions ranging from funeral directors (managing crematoria and burial grounds), insurance managers, trainees, and Yarden-franchisees to on the ground caretakers and volunteers of the Yarden association. The course consisted of 20 day-parts in which we would explore and discuss the

²*The Birth of African-American Culture* was first written in 1972 as a long essay and originally published in 1976 under the title *An Anthropological Approach to the Afro-American Past: A Caribbean Perspective*.

anthropological concept of culture and its significance for both the understanding of diversity (multiculturalism) and the notion of death attitudes and mortuary rituals in the Netherlands. In accordance with the managers who commissioned the course, these sessions would not simply provide a “recipe book” informing about the presumed distinctive cultural ingredients (i.e., the basic doctrines, beliefs, and customs regarding death, burial, and mourning of so-called religious-ethnic communities in the Netherlands). Instead of offering mere “cookbook” cultural prescriptions, the goal was to sensitize the participations for diversity, cultural change, ritual creativity, and the idea of lived religion throughout and within a variety of people in the Netherlands.

It soon became clear that such an approach is difficult to share. Although individual participants in the course, just like the more progressive managers in the organization, prove otherwise, Yarden’s multicultural aspirations so far are typified by quite a narrow understanding of cultural diversity. To put it briefly, throughout the company, there exists a rather dominant, essentializing discourse of the cultural composition of Dutch society. Not surprisingly, this discourse reflects broad-based opinions about multiculturalism already featuring for some time in political and public debates in the Netherlands—despite persistent social science criticism (cf. Modood, 2013). In line with Vertovec’s (1996, p. 5) still up-to-date observations, *multiculturalism* is usually portrayed as “a picture of society as a ‘mosaic’ of several bounded, nameable, individually homogeneous and unmeltable minority uni-cultures which are pinned onto the backdrop of a similarly characterised majority uni-culture.” This compartmentalization of groups, or “plural monoculturalism” as Sen (2006) put it, categorizes people into exclusive communities leading in the Netherlands to the following picture: “We have Surinamese, Dutch-Indians/Indonesians, Moroccans (Muslims), Turks (Muslims), Chinese, East-Europeans, and ...”³

In such listings, the so-called native, White Dutch (“autochthons”) are usually not considered an ethnic group; in fact they are rarely mentioned (they are not part of the bus stop discourse). The discourse is,

moreover, a perfect illustration of what Turner (1993) called *difference multiculturalism* meaning that particular (minority) groups are recognized as culturally distinctive and homogeneous, and that their presumed members are thought to have a fixed cultural baggage—the retentions of their supposed country of origin. All together, these notions express a very essentialist understanding of culture or cultural identity that coincides with ditto narrow understandings of ethnic, religious, and national identity (e.g., Moroccans are Muslims). Consequently, such an understanding leaves little room for a more processual (constructionist) approach, a “demotic discourse” (Baumann, 1996, 1999) or a form of “critical multiculturalism” (Turner, 1993), which includes and acknowledges the idea of multiple identifications, intersectionality, hybridity, internal diversity, and individual possibilities to opt out.

The fixation on groups and the subsequent reification of cultural (ethnic, religious, national) difference constitutes Yarden’s multicultural gaze toward otherness in Dutch society and, particularly, death care in the Netherlands. This results in a considerable discrepancy between the aim of the aforementioned course, heralded to the outer world with great fanfare, and the way Yarden actually encounters cultural diversity. For instance, the course seeks to show that culture, ethnicity, religion, and nation are not “things in the world, but perspectives of the world” or “ways of seeing” the social world (Brubaker, 2004, p. 168, 174–175). Yet, at the same time, Yarden organizes events and activities, supported by eye-catching media releases, following the essentializing logic of difference multiculturalism or what Baumann (1999) coined as “red boots parading.”

The following cases further delve into this gap between the words and reality, showing the awkward processes wherein words mean something different across a divide, yet wherein so-called disparate cultures and individuals also might come together to produce something new (cf. Tsing, 2005).

Road show: Learning the other

From the start of the project, Yarden has presented itself as a prudent partner. In various press releases and public presentations the organization shows sensitivity for the complexity of cultural diversity and, hence, its plans to cater all kinds of funerals, farewell meetings, and mourning gatherings “under one roof.” The following excerpt (from one of the many newspaper articles about the project) illustrates Yarden’s cautiousness:⁴

³This is what late Baumann (1996, 1999) called “bus stop multiculturalism” (personal conversations), which refers to the first response of people, waiting for the bus to arrive, to the question “Who lives here?” and echoes a dominant discourse on the cultural (ethnic, religious, national) composition of the population in a particular country, area, or neighborhood (in Baumann’s case, multicultural Southall, West London). The Dutch bus stop discourse—also used by many participants in the Yarden course and organization—usually consists of the largest “non-western” migrant groups (“allochtons”) that have become part of the post-World War II Netherlands.

⁴Retrieved from “Alle soorten rouwverwerking onder één dak.” *Het PAROOL*, January 15, 2014.

It is a complex puzzle ... such a multicultural funeral home. The African community has a lavish funeral with many decibels and emotion, the Surinamese Muslim community prefers quiet and subdued. An Antillean wake is not complete without liquor, whereas the Surinamese Hindu community will not perform rituals in a place where alcohol is served ... We are now having talks with representatives of the different communities in Southeast to identify specific needs.

The same excerpt, however, shows also the organization's perception of cultural diversity and, by following the mosaic logic of difference multiculturalism, how to deal with it.

Yarden's mode of operation aims at information exchange and dialogue. In early coverage of the project, manager Anita van Loon already explicitly elaborated on the line Yarden is taking: "We are now [January 2014] having talks with representatives of the different communities in Southeast to identify specific needs." Since then, the project's advocate never misses the opportunity to stress the significance of this approach. She also promotes on the organization's website the approach of knowledge exchange through consultation or information meetings (*verdiepingsbijeenkomsten*):⁵

It is important to identify which information, functionalities, and services different multicultural groups need. This might include information about the possibilities of a particular funeral service, but also about the cost of a funeral. Therefore Yarden organizes the coming months various *verdiepingsbijeenkomsten* with representatives of a range of multicultural groups.

The discourse regarding these meetings is characterized by the repeated use of terms like "different multicultural groups," "different communities," and "representatives." And it is, indeed, through the invitation and consultation of particular "community spokespersons" that Yarden aspires both to inform potential users about the future funeral home and to gather information about their specific needs. In other words, in reaching an audience the company takes a road show route.

In 2015, a first series of meetings has been completed. The objective of these meetings (sessions with 6 to 10 people of approximately 3 hours) was to create the opportunity to talk with potential users of the future funeral home, to discuss with them all possible services, to learn what kind of needs and wishes they would have, and how they would envision the design of the building and its facilities. The consultations were very detailed on, for example, the preferred color of the

tiles in the rooms for the (ritual) washing of the bodies, requirements for equipment to organize self-service catering, parking lots, seize of different spaces (until the seize of the toilets), audio-visual equipment, and so on.

As Van Loon stated in the earlier mentioned newspaper article, for Yarden "it is very important to know exactly what to do and what to do not." These meetings do indeed help a lot to meet this need or, in Foucauldian terms, to power Yarden's "will to knowledge" (Foucault, 1998). Not in the last place, because the encounters are well prepared, detailed, and respectful with regard to the invited interlocutors. Various guests indicated that they felt truly heard and that they appreciated Yarden's working method. Yet, at the same time, these interlocutors, as so-called representatives of a particular group, are mainly encouraged to opt just for one type of discourse: the dominant discourse of the mosaic multicultural society and, with this, the mosaic multicultural funeral home. To illustrate this for the 2014–2015 meetings, a Turkish imam was invited, with some other members of his mosque, to speak on behalf of "his people;" ritual specialists and religious leaders from respectively the Surinamese (Javanese) Muslim and Hindu (Hindustani) community were separately invited to discuss their particular wishes; an African-Surinamese ritual washing group was asked to tell about separation and purification rituals; and a Ghanaian spokeswoman was requested to organize a workshop in which a typical Ghanaian funeral was re-enacted.⁶ In addition to these meetings, the responsible managers visited various locations such as community centers, district offices, mosques, and temples to give presentations and hold discussions with potential users. They also participated in particular celebrations like the *Dinari Dey*, a yearly get-together of African-Surinamese ritual washing groups, and a huge Ghanaian memorial service.

Through these collaborative efforts and activities, supported by growing media attention and a vast public relations exercise, Yarden seems to succeed in the main intent of road shows like this: generating excitement and interest. At the same time, through its will to knowledge, the organization creates a discourse and practice that steers the cultural other into the direction of what Baumann (1999) critically termed *multiculti parading* or *red boots parading*: an essentialist, cultish celebration of diversity that encourages the representation of reified

⁵Retrieved from <https://www.yarden.nl/over-yarden/persinformatie/persberichten/oplevering-uitvaartcentrum-zuidoost-in-2017.htm>.

⁶Note that in the Dutch bus stop discourse, references to hyphenated identities are still rare. So even children or grandchildren ("second and third generation migrants") of migrants with for example a Turkish background are usually called *Turken* (Turks) and not Turkish-Dutch or Dutch-Turkish.

cultural groups (minorities) and their characteristics.⁷ In doing so, Yarden's approach confirms the (idea of the) existence of "bounded, nameable, individually homogeneous" groups or cultures (Vertovec 1996, p. 5) and accordingly invites or forces these groups to stage themselves to show, even prove, their cultural (ethnic, national, religious) distinctiveness.

Thus, thirsty for knowledge and eager to learn, Yarden's road show turns into a stage show that celebrates diversity through the organized representation of cultural difference and a reified understanding of culture. Another example of this folkloristic parading of cultures is Yarden's biennial symposium, which is organized by and for Yarden employees and members, but is also open to a larger audience.

Symposium: Staging the other

Every 2 years, Yarden organizes the Yarden Symposium "with a unique, relevant theme, and various speakers that share their story."⁸ In line with the organization's recent ambitions in the field of cultural diversity, last year's theme was "multicultural farewell in the Netherlands." On November 19, 2015, a couple of hundred visitors (undertakers, funeral directors, ritual specialists, volunteers, and many other interested persons) headed to a nicely located conference center in the heart of the country. They attended a day full of plenary sessions, panel discussions, workshops, and documentaries that all touched upon the issue of cultural diversity (or the lack of it) in Dutch death ways. The program's title and banner were emblematic for the organization's take on the theme (see Figure 1, showing the banner image of program's flyer; the picture is also part of the program's website).⁹

In retrospect, the whole event breathed the kind of cultish parading as previously set out, including folk music and dancing, a lunch with "multicultural snacks," presentations by experience experts ("in which the various rituals of and respect for all cultures take center stage"), discussions with representatives of "different cultures" ("what is important for a Moroccan and how does a Surinamese look at death?"), and "an exuberantly final chord, introducing the public to African farewell



Figure 1. "Death lives in our cultures" (program title) (Jet van Gaal/JET photography).

rituals." The parading already started at the very beginning of symposium's day, actually at the entrance of the event's location (see Figure 2, showing Surinamese brass players, who welcome the symposium's visitors). In its review of the symposium, the symposium's website gives an outstanding illustration of the red boots spectacle:¹⁰

Visitors to the Yarden Symposium 2015 are welcomed by brass players [*bazuinkoor*] who often accompany Surinamese funerals. Inside, a Ghanaian funeral procession descends into the conference hall. The pallbearers are dancing to the beat of the drums; the women are singing, clapping, and wearing beautiful robes. A very warm welcome to a colorful day.

The morning plenary talks stress the dynamics of cultural diversity in death ritual. Under the title "So you think you can dance?" I point to the influential role of various media and communication technologies across borders, and how they contribute to new trends in funerary rites. I seek to demonstrate that "the dancing with the coffin," which is becoming increasingly popular in Dutch African-Surinamese burial services, is not so much part of migrants' cultural baggage, but the effect of very recent flows of press and social media images in the Dutch-Surinamese transnational deathscape. Keywords are creolization and contingency. The next speaker, Claudia Venhorst, raises the question of why the phenomenon of the personalized funeral is usually perceived as the sole preserve of the secular, native Dutch autochthon. Seeking to stress the diversity of Islam, she argues that such individualization features just as well in the various ritual repertoires used by Muslims

⁷By applying the banal emblem or genre of the multicultural parade (alternately termed as *multiculti parading* or *red boots parading*), Baumann referred to Audrey Kobayashi who observed this kind of practice as a "Canadian institution." She coined the expression "red boots' multiculturalism" that typically consists of "folk dancing, cultural festivals and ethnic restaurants" (Kobayashi in Baumann, 1999, p. 122).

⁸Retrieved from <https://www.yarden.nl/vereniging/wat-we-doen.htm>.

⁹The following citations are retrieved from the program flyer and website <https://www.yarden.nl/vereniging/wat-we-doen/symposium.htm>. Accessed April 25, 2016. The photos were taken by Jet van Gaal/JET photography.

¹⁰Retrieved from <https://www.yarden.nl/vereniging/wat-we-doen/symposium.htm>.



Figure 2. “Surinamese bazuinkoor” (Jet van Gaal/JET photography).

in the Netherlands. Keywords are *lived religion* and *ritual creativity* (see also Venhorst, 2013). Both talks emphasize that there is no such thing as a recipe book in dealing with diversity in death ritual.

In the following panel sessions and discussions we observe little room for such discourse. By staging so-called representatives, the program has chosen to parade distinctiveness and to look for retentions rather than intersections. The final plenary event forms the apotheosis of this mosaic celebration of diversity. In conclusion the program has scheduled an “African farewell ritual” (see Figure 3). All participants get a djembe. Led by the musical ensemble Drumcafé, everybody is stimulated to beat the drum. Like it is a cultural festival, most of the audience enthusiastically participates in the rhythmic playing. Later we can find on the

symposium’s website: “The exuberance of the Africans shows: to say farewell can be done in many ways.”

A week after the symposium I receive an email of one of the symposium’s participants, who also attended Yarden’s course on multicultural death and mourning rituals in the Netherlands. She refers to the “drum show” that produced, according to her, feelings of awkwardness. Quite telling is the way she concludes her astonishment about the stage act: “So you think you can play the drum?”

Coda: Branding diversity

In December 2015, *Vakblad Uitvaart*, a specialist journal on Dutch funerals and the funeral industry, published an article about Yarden’s attention for multiculturalism.



Figure 3. “African farewell ritual” (Jet van Gaal/JET photography).

Under the title “Attention for Multicultural Netherlands in New Course” (Sweers, 2015) it reports on an interview with the managing director of Yarden.¹¹ The director referred to the opening of the multicultural funeral home in Amsterdam Southeast in 2017 and talked about the ongoing dialogue with the “cultures and movements in the neighborhood.” She recalled the first conversations: “I was surprised when I talked to their representatives. They told me: ‘Nobody really listens to us, to how we want to organize a funeral.’ Whereas you want to resort to your own rituals precisely at times of birth and death.” This experience, she continued, made her realize that the professional funeral business needs a different approach to free itself from self-evident views and practices. Not without pride, she then turned to Yarden’s initiative for the course “Death, Burial & Mourning in Multicultural Netherlands,” praising the insights it provides to Yarden employees and proudly presenting a second edition (that has started February 2016). In explaining the purpose and content of the course, the director employed the widely accepted dominant discourse talking about the main ethnic groups in the Netherlands and “some cultures” that prefer time-consuming funerals “with lots of music, dance, and many persons present.” The stereotypical photos that come along with the article further perfect the picture.

What is perhaps more striking is how the managing director uses the course and, more in general, Yarden’s awareness of cultural diversity to differentiate from competitors in the funeral business. Yarden clearly embraces multiculturalism as both a social and business reality. In doing so, it increasingly presents itself as the innovative maverick in the Dutch death care industry by applying diversity as an effective brand strategy. This approach, including the creation of the multicultural expert, indeed gives the company a major edge in an ever more competitive market. Yet, a brand is also a promise to customers; it tells them what they can expect and, in this case, what Yarden is or wants to be.

Myopic or not, there is definitely a promise to newcomers (consumers with a migrant background), but what about the established clients, what can they expect? As mentioned in this article, the othering gaze (a product of the Dutch hegemonic bus stop discourse on diversity) paradoxically does not see majority culture. Consequently, in the transformation from a monocultural institution to a multicultural one, Yarden might develop a blind eye for the needs and preferences of White Dutch autochthons—just as it might overlook

personal choices of the ethnic or religious other and the very existence of overlapping or intersecting identities. To avoid these kind of blind spots, the company should avert its gaze from the mere banalities of red boots parading and the reifying discourse that goes along with this.¹² Because people, in contrast to what the essentializing logic of difference multiculturalism presumes, constantly make choices whom to identify with when and where; they make choices when to engage a reifying discourse of culture and when to engage a processual discourse. As a result, their multicultural and dialogical praxis is often not so much concerned with distinctiveness, retentions, and otherness, but with intersection, change, and relatedness. In fact, if we look more carefully, they show us a way “from culti-parading to multi-relating” giving numerous examples of how “multicultural thinking” is actually “multirelational thinking” (Baumann, 1999, p. 121ff.): so-called others form a necessary part of what “we” think we are and want, and the other way around.

In this regard one of the course members, a crematory manager, provided an apt example of such inclusive thinking. In his final presentation he outlined his future “Yarden House” explicitly not as a multicultural but a multifunctional funeral home stressing the significance of space for different purposes and gatherings, seemingly awkward encounters, constant adaptation, renewal, creativity, and ritual innovation. He suggested that multifunctionalism as a diversity approach would focus primarily on preferences irrespective cultural, religious, or ethnic background and would therefore include both so-called minority cultures and the cultural majority group.

We should not, however, throw away the baby with the bath water. People, individuals or groups, do have specific, culturally informed needs and preferences. In fact, not only funeral directors but also bereaved people do often long for “the recipe book.” Yet reality is obstinate and also recipes, just like cultures, customs, and rituals, change. Hence, the “traditional meal” is surprisingly often a blend of “old” and “new” cultural ingredients “remodeling” in the spirit of Mintz and Price (1992) Dutch funeral fashion as a whole.

Critical to a successful transformation from a monocultural institution to a multicultural funeral home is, therefore, to understand how people in a multicultural environment use different discourses of culture and ritual at the same time. Then we will see that, in opting to use one or the other, the criteria are situational and

¹¹The following citations are retrieved from the article written by Sweers (2015, pp. 12–13).

¹²This apparently normative statement actually expresses the advice I give the company and forms the conceptual backbone of the course that I give to its employees.

usually pragmatic (with cost savings as one of the main criteria), and that some preferences can only be reached by reifying cultural difference, whereas other needs are best realized by relativizing rigid (imagined) cultural boundaries and otherness. As argued, the test of such understanding can be put in a simple question: “Do we regard the so-called others as a necessary part of who we are?” (Baumann, 1999, p. 124). Of course, the question will turn out to be less simple than it looks. Yet, it will lead (and will only lead) to “groups” and individuals to co-initiate the birth of the future funeral home and to actually use the facility.

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