

Introduction

Indigenous Ways of Death in Australia

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The focus of this book, on death in Indigenous Australia, arises from the situation Indigenous Australians confront in their life-worlds today. As we believe this volume demonstrates, mourning and related practices have become especially germane for indigenous people in contemporary Australia, and this phenomenon reflects on their experiences *as* indigenous people in a post-settler society. In Australia, a country that enjoys immense wealth, based primarily on mining, Indigenous Australians suffer the highest mortality rates of any social or cultural group, with life expectancy rates that are 20 years lower than those of the average Australian.¹ These significantly greater rates of premature and preventable mortality are to be found whether one is looking at urban, rural or remote indigenous communities. Ill-health and death are ubiquitous in Indigenous Australia.

While risk factors arising from lifestyle play a significant role in these outcomes, medical evidence from around the world indicates that low life expectancies and high mortality rates are common to indigenous peoples in many countries, and that this situation is strongly related to *being* indigenous. For example, discussing the situation of Aboriginal populations in Canada, Allard, Wilkins and Berthelot note that as in other countries, ‘Aboriginal peoples bear a disproportionate burden of disease and die younger and at higher rates than do members of the non-Aboriginal population’ (2004, 51; and see Kunitz 1990).

Durie identifies ‘four main propositions’ that have been advanced to explain the current state of indigenous health: ‘genetic vulnerability, socioeconomic disadvantage, resource alienation, and political oppression’, with socio-economic disadvantage considered to be particularly significant and genetic vulnerability much less so (2003, 510). In his paper comparing indigenous health and mortality in Canada, the United States and New Zealand, Trovato (2001, 67) argues that his findings, based on empirical evidence, ‘are consistent with the proposition that the contemporary mortality conditions of these three minorities reflect, in

1 Readers may note that figures given for the indigenous/non-indigenous mortality difference vary from publication to publication. Recent government statistics suggest that 20 years is currently the most accurate estimate: life expectancy at birth in 1997–99: indigenous: males 56 years/females 63 years; non-indigenous: males 76 years/females 82 years: <http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/research/ldi-lsic_factsheet2.htm>

varying degrees, problems associated with poverty, marginalization and social disorganization'. A recent report on Canadian indigenous health and mortality similarly concluded that 'there is a persisting and broadly based gap' between the health and mortality rates of Status Indians and those of non-Status Indians, that 'cannot be explained by some specific genetic risk alone, as the causes are varied and rooted in socio-economic disparity and cultural disruption' (Office of the Provincial Health Officer 2007, 17). As Taracena and Herrera (2003, 511) point out, this is because 'what made us "indigenous" is to have had our property, land, and natural resources repossessed and our social, cultural, and historical identity repressed'. In other words, being indigenous is inherently relational; 'the emergence of a domain called (variously) "the customary", the "traditional" and/or "the indigenous" is made visible chiefly in the bi-cultural context of the modern nation-state' (Weiner and Glaskin 2006, 4; and see de la Cadena and Starn 2007).

There is also evidence to suggest that similar issues of premature mortality apply in countries where being 'indigenous' may be harder to characterize than in Australia and other comparable settler-colonial nations such as Canada, North America and New Zealand. In India, for example, *adivasi* (indigenous) peoples have also been found to 'experience excess mortality compared to non-indigenous groups, even after adjusting for economic standards of living' (Subramanian, Smith and Subramanyam 2006, 1794). In many countries, then, being indigenous means a person is more likely to suffer socio-economic disadvantage and related social malaise than being non-indigenous, and this is reflective of social inequalities.

As anthropologists who have worked with Indigenous Australians over many years, the contributors to this volume have seen another dimension of indigenous struggle: that arising from the regular experiences of death and bereavement. In Australia, much ethnography has included some discussion of death and mortuary practices (for example, see Spencer and Gillen 1899; Kaberry 1939; Meggitt 1962; Berndt and Berndt 1970; 1992; Myers 1986); some has specifically focused on death and related aspects (for example, Berndt 1950; Reid 1979; McKenzie 1980; Morphy 1984; Robinson 1990; Venbrux 1995; Marett 2002; Magowan 2007). Yet, while the high mortality rates in Indigenous Australia are common knowledge amongst Indigenous Australians and those who work with them, little anthropological attention has been given to the consequences of dealing with death so regularly and so consistently in Indigenous Australia.

Nor is it clear that the social dimensions of indigenous mortality have been examined in comparative ethnographic detail in other contexts as we do here. By way of example, *Indigenous Experience Today* (de la Cadena and Starn 2007) raises important issues surrounding indigeneity (and indeed, how indigeneity is constituted and conceptualized) in many contexts around the world, but does not comparatively explore the subject of death and its consequences. As the chapters in this volume attest, high mortality rates – which research does associate with factors arising from being indigenous – are of considerable significance in Australian indigenous experience at least, and we would suspect this to be the case in other societies where indigenous mortality rates are similarly high.

In other societies experiencing new challenges, including high mortality rates (as in southern Africa as a consequence of AIDS), aspects of funerary ritual and mourning have likewise been subjected to scholarly analysis. For example, researchers have explored a range of impacts of frequent and high funeral costs on spending decisions in households (Friere 2004); the role of funerals in the shaping of urban culture as people in Zimbabwe townships adapt traditional and Christian approaches to mortuary rituals (Ranger 2004); the influence of frequently held funerals in public space in creating opportunities for identity formation and reinforcement, and for the demonstration of community cooperation and solidarity (Durham and Klaitis 2002). It is becoming increasingly clear that wherever we find socio-economic disadvantage, we find inequality of health and mortality as well (for example, Wilkinson 1996; Sapolsky 2004). Farmer has called this relationship ‘structural violence’ (Farmer 2003; 2004).

Anthropology and Death

As a human universal, death has biological, social and cultural dimensions. As many anthropologists have shown, the end of a life is mourned and marked by those who live in ways that reflect not only on the particular life concerned, but also on the social and cultural context in which that life was embedded. The person, in bodily form, dies, and different human societies around the world deal with the significance of this transition and the rupture it causes in social relations in various ways. Human responses to death have long been, and continue to be, of anthropological interest (for example, Goody 1962; Metcalf and Huntington 1979; Bloch and Parry 1982; Palgi and Abramovitch 1984; Damon and Wagner 1989; Robben 2004a; Kaufman and Morgan 2005; Clark-Decès 2005; Venbrux and Lemonnier 2007). There are, no doubt, many reasons for the intensity of human attention to death, but principal among them is the likelihood that death provides us with important predictive information as to how the living are to fare (Chisholm 1999). In constructions of death and associated mortuary practices, we can see the ways in which various human communities understand their prospects for living and the peril they face in doing so (see, for example, Jackson 1998; Danforth 2004). While death must be regarded as a constant in human social life, the contexts of its inevitability can nevertheless profoundly shape experience of death and responses to it. Within the diversity of anthropological treatments of death, two approaches are widely (and, given the history of our discipline, not surprisingly) found: that the study of death is a means of studying life (for example, Van Gennep 1960; Metcalf and Huntington 1979; Levine 1982), and that culturally specific beliefs and practices surrounding death are often illuminated by understanding other aspects of the contexts in which they are found.

In affluent countries like Australia, the experience of the death of ‘close family’ is usually traumatic, but, depending obviously on the size of the family concerned, and the circumstances in which it occurs, death is usually an aberration, something

encountered in relation to certain significant others only occasionally. Perhaps this is why a situation involving regular mortuary rituals does not evidently 'fit' within Whitehouse's (2005) ritual frequency hypothesis. He theorizes that low frequency rituals usually have strong emotive content, and that this is an important aspect of their consolidation in memory and hence social transmission over time. Conversely, he argues that high frequency rituals have less emotive force; they are consolidated through repetition. The case of mortuary rituals as high-frequency events does not obviously appear as a possible consideration, in his discussion. In kin-based societies, like those in Indigenous Australia, however, where the social universe is largely populated with people who are considered to be relatives and referred to as such, high mortality rates mean that funerals – as rituals – occur frequently, and are highly memorable and emotive. An understanding of Indigenous Australians' life-worlds is not possible without a consideration of death, and their response to it, given its centrality today (see also Damon 1989, 3). One of the main themes that this volume seeks to address, then, is the constancy of dealing with death and its effects on the living.

As Hiatt (1996) has shown, the ethnography of Indigenous Australians has played a significant role in the evolution and development of social anthropology and other social theory. Edward Tylor, James Frazer, Emile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud all drew on Australian material to develop their ideas concerning different facets of human social evolution; one of the primary sources that Frazer, Durkheim and Freud consulted in this regard was Spencer and Gillen's (1899) *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (Hiatt 1996, 105–9, 144). Indeed, the contribution that Australian ethnography has made to social theory is well encapsulated by Miller's 'arbitrarily selected sample' of those who have drawn upon it, a list that includes Hegel, Engels, Marx, Freud, Durkheim, Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, amongst others (2002, 611), and to which we could add Jung (Petchkovsky, San Roque and Beskow 2003, 215). This impressive list of social thinkers who have relied on Indigenous Australian ethnography did so on the basis that Indigenous Australians represented pre-industrialized humanity in an uncorrupted form, a view much influenced by late nineteenth-century evolutionary theory: as Hiatt says, 'in the context of inescapable questions about the natural history of our own species, Australian Aborigines were assigned the role of exemplars par excellence of the beginning of early forms' (1996, xii). Anthropological views about the evolution of human societies have changed considerably since these early arguments were made; it is now widely recognized that all human societies and cultures continually evolve and that they do so in relation to interactions and relations that occur beyond so-called 'cultural boundaries'. The intercultural domain of indigenous and non-indigenous relations in Australia as a post-settler nation is clearly of importance in this regard, and is one of the themes emerging from chapters in this volume.

This contribution to the anthropology of death comes at what is clearly a significant moment in the fortunes of indigenous people in Australia, where the demands of high mortality, the frequency of mortuary rituals and the pervasiveness of mourning in everyday life have engendered significant socio-cultural

transformations in their societies. In her book focusing on the interconnectedness of Kukatja Aboriginal people and place, Poirier (2005) concludes by specifically referring to the high incidence of death amongst them, and to some of the consequences arising from this. She describes how Kukatja were continually engaged in protracted mourning rituals, which overwhelmed 'local agendas at the individual and collective levels' and constituted a kind of 'work' that appears incomprehensible and 'unproductive' to the neoliberal state, but which nevertheless constituted, for Kukatja people themselves, 'a major responsibility towards their sociocosmic order' (2005, 251). In remote areas where classificatory kinship links people across vast distances, and modern transport facilitates the traversal of these, obligations to attend funerals, and the collective mourning of the dead, have been significantly extended in spatial and temporal terms. Living a thousand kilometres away does not constitute a sufficient impediment to attending a kinsperson's funeral, although economic difficulties associated with such travel might; funerals are not held immediately, but planned so that kin who should attend have sufficient notice to get there. How these important social and cultural obligations are understood by non-Indigenous Australians – or not understood – has wider ramifications for indigenous socio-economic positioning within the liberal nation-state. Borsboom has argued that anthropologist Donald Thomson's work was 'visionary' for revealing mortuary rituals as a microcosm of indigenous cosmology (cited in Strang 2007, 336). As the chapters in this volume demonstrate, important aspects of the contemporary, lived experience of Indigenous Australians' everyday life are illuminated in death and bereavement; these include cosmology, conceptions of personhood, transformations in kinship and ritual, and experiences of inequality.

We wish to highlight several themes that appear and reappear in the papers. The first of these is the context of extreme social, political and material inequality in which indigenous people fall ill and die in unprecedented numbers. This is also the context in which the living attempt to respond to this unprecedented situation. We also highlight the harm that loss has on indigenous lives, and communities, and the means that indigenous people employ in attempts to ameliorate this harm. Here we draw the reader's attention to the emphasis given, again and again, to relations with kin and family, relations that may be pursued to such an extent that engagement with other social possibilities are sacrificed. Does this reflect Austin-Broos' suggestion that families 'act simultaneously to insulate [their members] from a hostile, racist society' (2003, 130)? Does it reflect a relatively enduring and exclusive emotional priority of family in indigenous psyches (Burbank 2006)? Both these suggestions are possible. When family and kin die, especially from premature and preventable deaths, it is likely that their loss is more keenly felt.

The Importance of Mortuary Practices

This volume presents eleven chapters from anthropologists who draw on their contemporary and long-term fieldwork across continental Australia and the islands in the Torres Strait.² In bringing these contributions together, some striking similarities across Indigenous Australia emerge; death and mortuary practices in Indigenous Australia are understood by the contributors to this collection as metaphors for the oft seemingly to-the-death-struggle in which Indigenous Australians are enmeshed for the preservation of their lives and identity. Death happens, but people use it as ‘a complex symbol’ (Wahl 1959, 26, in Becker 2004, 27). It is used as such both by those affected immediately by a particular death and by more distant observers of death. Anthropologists have long attended to death as a complex symbol, not simply for understandings of death, but also for understandings of life; this theme is one we wish to emphasize here.

We believe that the accounts of mortuary practices presented in this collection provide an important source of insight into contemporary indigenous experience. Mortuary practices are responses to death, a most significant human transition, and the one most likely to invoke a fear-like response in any human community. In Indigenous Australia, death and mortuary practices seem, at least to the outsider, to be a constant presence. At first glance this could simply be the result of the 20-year differential in Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian mortality. While mortuary practices, we are told, ‘are a true cultural universal’ (Robben 2004b, 9), such rituals need not be elaborate, extended or expensive. Yet these are the very characteristics of mortuary rituals that the authors in this volume have identified. Given that a possible response to an increasing death rate might be a psychic numbing or denial and a cultural de-emphasis on ritual, we need to ask why indigenous people make as much of death as they do. We also need to know why this is a domain in which their agency is so clearly present.

Macdonald (Chapter 7), for example, wonders why a Wiradjuri woman from south-eastern Australia asked her, an anthropologist and an outsider, to promise to come to her funeral. In doing so she draws a connection between funeral attendance and ‘demand sharing’ (Peterson 1993). This analytic step moves us towards understanding why mortuary rituals dominate ritual life in so many of today’s indigenous communities. Kin relationships are of enduring importance to Wiradjuri, as to other indigenous people, but must nevertheless be achieved through constant testing, much of which is manifest in the demands made by socially significant others. ‘Promise me you’ll come to my funeral’ is a demand, identical to the kinds of acts that create, maintain and signify the enduring importance of kin. Macdonald experienced this demand as ‘immensely powerful’. As she

2 In accordance with indigenous conventions concerning the use of deceased persons’ names when speaking of them, contributors to this volume have used pseudonyms, initials or the local indigenous name used to refer to the recently deceased. These are the names used in this Introduction.

points out, 'there are no longer spiritually defined imperatives to attend funerals, nor sanctions if one doesn't', but Wiradjuri people 'respond to the demands of sociality', motivated by a core self that is apprehended via relationships to kin and country. Similarly, Murri people in Charters Towers of Northern Queensland are understood by Babidge (Chapter 8) to be 'demonstrating' and 'reconstituting' 'family' as they organize and attend funerals: 'travelling for funerals suggests that claims of belonging to family and place must be performed; connections among families and links between "communities" across the state are replayed and reproduced by this movement'.

Tonkinson (Chapter 2) suggests another source of the importance of funerals when she juxtaposes the attitudes of Western Desert Martu and many non-Martu to them. At least some non-Martu say funerals are too expensive, time consuming and disruptive of the essential activities of daily life. Yet Martu people do not hesitate to leave jobs, take children out of school and spend scarce dollars in order to organize funerals and attend them. Unable to engage with most of their day-to-day life in a manner consonant with 'self-management', the Martu find, in funerals and other ritual activities, important venues in which their autonomy and control may be displayed. It is in the process of realizing a funeral that Martu, and usually Martu alone, plan, choose, make decisions and direct both blackfellas and whitefellas alike,³ and all this in accord with their ideas and ideals of Martu life. 'It is', says Tonkinson of death and funerals, 'as if they have chosen to deal with a reality which they feel helpless to alter by applying their energy and skills to making it a celebration of who they are'. McCoy (Chapter 3) makes a similar point about the neighbouring Puntu, saying that they 'can be seen to be developing new and creative ways of expressing those values they seek to maintain in sorry business'.

If, along with Davis (Chapter 10), we see the headstones of Saibai Islanders in the Torres Strait as 'an autobiography of the Saibaian people', we can understand them as expressions of indigenous efficacy that are both concrete and emphatic. Davis has observed that over the years, the texts chiselled into the limestone, granite and marble grave markers have shifted systematically from containing, in English, simple biographical information, to lengthy and more elaborate inscriptions. The later texts incorporate employment and civic careers, phrases in Kala Kawaw Ya (the indigenous language) that delineate characteristics of the deceased including both personal qualities and clan identity. Clan symbols have also been added in recent years. Unveiled in 'spectacular' ceremonies that are 'economically nonsensical', these inscribed monuments speak of Saibaian engagement in local, national and global endeavours, affirming the place of Torres Strait Islanders in, and their contribution to, encompassing social formations and polities. Davis interprets the recent texts as 'statements about the more problematic categories of labour and culture and Saibaian's own experience of integration into

3 'Blackfellas' and 'whitefellas' are terms used by many Indigenous Australians to refer to Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians respectively.

global industries, religion and civic institutions': he proposes that they be seen as something more than mere expressions of family pride. Headstones speak of 'family, religion and identity', and the 'rituals, orations, feasting, dancing and gift-giving' that celebrate their 'opening' 'are an opportunity to reinforce the centrality of family relationships'. The 'tombstone opening' provides an interstice where 'their own authority and religious expressions of power are alternative to the space of the state and its interdictions in their lives'. In presenting the headstones of Saibai thus, Davis extends to the reader a lesson on the ways in which we may read mortuary rituals to better understand the hopes, concerns and aspirations that motivate indigenous political actions.

Premature and Preventable Mortality

Indigenous Australians do not appear to be doing well in the stakes of life. Data from South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory indicate that Indigenous Australians have higher death rates at all ages than non-Indigenous Australians, and that this greater mortality rate is at its highest among persons aged between 25 and 64 (Gray, Hunter and Taylor 2004). As McCoy points out in his chapter on 'sorry business' in the Kutjungka region of Western Australia, in the recent past, most deaths occurred among the very young or the very old. Today, it is often people in the prime of life who die. These deaths are often unexpected and, from the perspective of the epidemiological literature, are largely cases of premature and preventable mortality. Tonkinson, Macdonald, Glaskin (Chapter 5) and Musharbash (Chapter 1) present us with examples of how epidemiological statistics play out on the ground. Tonkinson tells us of two, among many, Martu families, one of whom lost six members, including a teenager, in a 30-month period. The other family lost two men in their twenties in the space of a year. With reference to deaths of young people, Martu have remarked, 'They should be burying us', a refrain echoed by other people in these pages. Macdonald has been told by Wiradjuri people that 'they are "funeralled out", exhausted by too many deaths' and at Erambie she sees few Wiradjuri men who have lived past their mid fifties. Hunter's (1993) innovative study of mortality in the Kimberley demonstrated that for a period between the 1950s and the 1980s, the indigenous death rate was nearly four times that of the non-indigenous population. As Glaskin says in her chapter, Hunter explains this with reference to multiple factors, not the least of which is massive social dislocation. During Musharbash's fieldwork central Australian Warlpiri people at Yuendumu spent up to a third of their days in 'sorry' rituals, which precede funerals in that part of Indigenous Australia. Warlpiri people appear to recognize an inordinately large dedication of time, energy, emotion and other resources to death when they say that 'sorry business is Yapa way', reflecting, as Musharbash says, 'the way in which Warlpiri people live and think about life'.

The Inequality of Grief

As anthropologists, we find it difficult to write about death. It is difficult not to project our sense of its inevitability and horror, though we must anticipate the possibility that we may be writing of people and communities where death might not be experienced in quite this way. At the same time it seems ridiculous, if not immoral, not to grant indigenous people the emotional centrality of death that anthropologists writing from elsewhere both proclaim and substantiate. As people so rarely touched especially by premature and preventable mortality outside of our research contexts, we also find it difficult to write about places where death, in spite of being unwelcome, visits far too regularly. However, the extent of premature and preventable mortality in Indigenous Australia today is the current state of their human experience, and one which we as anthropologists also encounter, albeit differently, through our relationships with Indigenous Australians. Indeed, it is such experience – an ever-increasing familiarity with death – that provided the impetus for this volume. Death is something we have all experienced to varying extents; losing people for whom we had regard and affection, attending funerals, and seeing the impact of loss on people and communities. This latter experience, in particular, was what convinced us of the centrality of death for understanding Indigenous Australia today.

Crediting Hiatt's (1961) initiative, some years ago Reid (1979) spoke of the centrality of individual bereavement and the need for anthropologists to address mourning at the level of the personal as well as that of the social. Glaskin's reflections on the death of a friend and Musharbash's discussion of emotions associated with sorry business help us understand why anthropological attention is particularly important in this regard. Our principal research technique, participant observation, requires sustained interpersonal engagement. We get to know people, not as cultural exemplars, but as individuals,⁴ sometimes as friends. Our conversations are not merely exchanges of verbal information, but also occasions for the exchange of more nuanced forms of communication, of touch, scent, the reading of body movement, posture and facial expression. To varying degrees we get to know the people we work with and develop feelings about them, and they get to know, and develop feelings about, us. Most critically for the topics of this collection, these conversations are also occasions for exchanging feelings, not perhaps the full-blown emotional experiences that emerge from childhood socialization, but culturally informed empathetic responses based on extensive immersion in a cross-cultural setting. To some extent, we feel what our indigenous intimates are feeling, while at the same time we know that we cannot entirely share their sense of loss and grief. This, of course, is the case between any two people, no matter the extent of shared experience. But as we cross language and cultural

4 To use the term 'individual' is not to deny the possibility of a 'dividual'. However intermeshed indigenous people may be, we have all engaged with distinct people with distinct identities and biographies. Our use of the word 'individual' refers to these experiences.

borders, however blurred they may be, we must acknowledge the immediacy of our experience of shared sadness, grief, anger and despair.

Just as Warlpiri people spend around a third of their time in sorry rituals, so too did Musharbash during her extensive fieldwork at Yuendumu. We can see in her discussion of grief that her immersion in daily Warlpiri life has facilitated a deeply empathetic reading of sorry business. Following Durkheim's analytic disconnection of 'sentiment felt and the gestures made by the actors in the rite' (Durkheim 1975 [1915], 442),⁵ the majority of anthropologists have focused on the social production of feelings in relation to death. Joining exceptions like Rosaldo (1989, 1–21), Musharbash renders ritual practice not simply as institutionalized action but as a genuine expression of feelings. She describes the practice of wailing in a collective response to a solitary mourner's cry as motivated both by the respondents' own feelings of loss and their pain for the truly bereaved: 'co-wailing often is as heartfelt as the original piercing wail because even if one felt less pain about the particular death, it hurts one to hear the pain of a woman one is close to'.

Glaskin's chapter suggests both the scientific and moral importance of attention to these feelings and to their impact on indigenous lives. In her tribute to a Bardi friend, she focuses on three losses he suffered prior to his death. As he attempts to share his experience of loss, she begins to understand more about 'the cumulative effects of grief'. A short time after her friend's death, his brother-in-law, mourning his recently deceased wife, fell off a cliff near Broome. The brother-in-law told Glaskin, from his hospital bed in Perth, how his wife's death was, as she says, 'too much to bear, coming as it did on top of other deaths, his brother's baby, his mother, his brother-in-law, and others'. Her friend had died following losses much like these. This parallel experience reinforced Glaskin's view that the 'cumulative effects of grief' may have contributed to his death.

Nor is it merely the frequency of death that compounds the effects of grief. Loss of family may be especially injurious for indigenous people. No doubt many of us experience 'a loss of part of oneself' when intimates die. However, Glaskin argues that the extent of this experience depends in part on 'how "oneself" is experienced'. Positing a relational self as a characteristic of Kimberley psyches, Redmond (Chapter 4) suggests that 'the loss of a major component of a distributed self may leave close kin in a very real state of disintegration'.

5 Given the history of the discipline, it is not surprising that anthropology has taken the direction it has in the study of death and surrounding ritual. Had it developed differently, it might have been inspired by other ideas to be found in Durkheim: for example, his view that 'the only forces which are really active are of a wholly impersonal nature: they are the emotions aroused in the group by the death of one of its members' (Durkheim 1975 [1915], 447). Durkheim here is referring to the use of ideas about souls and spirits to explain mourning rituals. That is, in contrast to efforts emphasizing 'impersonal' forces, he is explaining mourning rituals with reference to emotion.

Over and over, contributors to this volume note two things about ‘family’ in Indigenous Australia: families are socially and emotionally foundational, playing a significant self-defining role, and they stand in startling contrast to hostility, discrimination, ignorance and indifference from the larger society. As one example of many in these pages, Murriss of Charters Towers, according to Babidge, recognize the centrality of family in their lives when, ‘accusations of “disrespect” are aimed at social behaviour that allows other business “in” to the funeral domain, a field of social action that rhetorically belongs to family’. One woman, for example, criticized another for holding a meeting during the week in which a funeral was to be held for their mutual kinswoman, when the deceased ‘hasn’t even gone down yet’. This ‘other business’, efforts such as native title meetings, is no doubt of considerable importance to the lives and fortunes of Charters Towers Murriss. These accusations of disrespect, provoked when ‘other business’ is allowed to interfere with ‘the business of death’, underline the extent to which ‘family’ is given precedence, at least at times when death is immanent.

Change in Indigenous Australians’ life-worlds induced from outside has clearly contributed to increased mortality, as Hunter (1993) has noted. It may also exacerbate grief. McCoy’s account of changing mortuary practices in the Kutjungka region of the Kimberley provides a case in point. From the 1930s onwards, Catholic missionaries and other *Kartiya* (whitefellas) in the region took responsibility for burying indigenous dead. Indigenous people continued their mortuary rituals, at least in modified forms, but these were held apart from those conducted by the Whites. In the early 1980s the response of kin to the deaths of three young men, related to alcohol and automobile accidents, shifted indigenous practice, eliciting ‘a more public demonstration of grief, a demonstration that shifted Puntu and their activities around sorry business into a much more public and *Kartiya* space’. In entering this space, indigenous people have invited the interference of whitefellas who ‘can act to obstruct, modify or restrict the expression of sorry business’. What Western institution is more restrictive than a prison? McCoy opens his chapter with an account of a young man in jail who, knowing he was unlikely to be permitted to attend the funeral of a close father’s brother, threatened to commit suicide, to ‘make them see how much it meant to me’. He was not able to attend, and was left feeling that ‘I should have been there’, providing us with a striking case of ‘the difficulty of trying to achieve an appropriate personal and cultural expression of being “sorry” within a *Kartiya*, post-mission and post-colonial world’. There is little doubt in McCoy’s mind that the young man’s suicide threat was a reaction to his inability to share his feelings of loss and grief with others from his community.

In Chapter 6, Elliott writes about the Alyawarr man, Kwementyay Gunner, who was, as a child, removed from his family under the government policy of the day. In this case, Western institutions both created and exacerbated grief, the grief that Kwementyay and his family suffered at their separation. Its intensity is indicated by the family’s attempt at ‘forgetting’; reincorporation of Kwementyay via remembrance was not possible when his whereabouts and fate were unknown.

As Macdonald says of the Wiradjuri, ‘to really “lose” a person is not to remember them’. It would seem that some Indigenous Australians share the feelings of some Westerners that it is worse to lose a child to the unknown than to lose a child to death. Grief was again manifested by the family upon Kwementyay’s return; ‘they were “happy” to welcome him back as kin and cried and cut themselves – similar grief behaviour they had carried out when he had been taken away 35 years earlier’. Evidently, grief was not only present upon removal and reunification, it was endured by this family for the length of the separation, and for Kwementyay, grieving for his lost indigeneity, beyond that period of time.

Psycho-social Costs of Death

It does not seem far-fetched to understand death as an attack on human attachments.⁶ In the anthropological literature it is easy to find accounts that buttress this interpretation. Redmond’s description of mortuary rituals provides the most extended example in this volume. He speaks of people’s ‘anger at being abandoned by a deceased relative’, of how the bereaved’s ‘grief is often articulated as a cruel abandonment of his kin by the dead person’ and how a newly made widow ‘undergoes a temporary regression to a dependent child-like status’ in which she must rely upon her in-laws to feed her. But also note Smith’s (Chapter 11) discussion of mourners’ feelings of abandonment, and descriptions of mortuary rituals from Tonkinson, Musharbash and McCoy: wailing is responded to by touching and embracing, so reminiscent of the child and caretaker reunion following separation, at least in ideal circumstances. In this context we might wonder that while Wiradjuri mourners overcome by grief are assisted to leave the church, so too may they be told to ‘pull themselves together’.

If we assume human attachment provides the psychic foundation for feelings of basic security, we can see the harm that death is doing in indigenous communities today. Often, if not always, the purpose of their mortuary practices is not to separate from the dead, or forget them, but to reincorporate the dead into the lives of their kin. Musharbash makes this very clear in her account of Warlpiri name avoidance and how this was managed when a woman named Kay died. No longer was it appropriate to say ‘KFC’, but in the very act of saying, “‘We stopped at the Chicken Place on the way back from town”, people were saying, “Kay is not with us anymore””. Rituals in various parts of Indigenous Australia enable reincorporation: for example, when the bereaved ingest an animal representing the deceased. As Redmond says with reference to such rituals in the Northern Kimberley, ‘this completion of “the work of mourning” ... is brought to fruition

6 In the ideal attachment experience, at least from the affluent Westerner’s perspective, children experiencing separation anxiety seek contact with their primary caretaker and their primary caretaker responds in such a way that feelings of anxiety turn into feelings of security (Bowlby 1969).

not through relinquishing the affective ties to the dead but by incorporating them fully into the bodies of the living’.

It is true that indigenous people have devised responses to death that might strike us as creative and positive, but this does not mean that death has no ‘sting’ for them. We should not ignore the fact that wailing is featured in mortuary rituals across Australia. Wailing signals the anguish of loss and probably originates in the attachment experience, manifest at the moment that children separated from their primary caretakers feel separation anxiety; wailing, though, clearly emerges as an enculturated practice over the course of individual development. Nor should we ignore facts such as that when deaths occur, at least in central and western parts of Indigenous Australia, they are announced as ‘bad news’ (Musharbash, Tonkinson).

We must also pay attention to the circumstances in which people die and mourn. If the deaths of others inform us about our own life’s prospects, the frequent, premature and often traumatic deaths of people with whom we are socially and emotionally entwined do not convey a sense of promise for our own future. If our present is already greatly impoverished, we have hope neither for the present nor in days to come. Many Indigenous Australians must experience the near-constant presence of *memento mori* as an added source of oppression. Macdonald sees something like this when she discusses the ‘loneliness’ of Sarah, the woman who asks her to come to her funeral. Sarah had family, so why did she need Macdonald at her funeral? A well-attended funeral is a ‘good death’ that speaks of a ‘good life’, and Sarah was concerned that at her death she would be ‘left lonely’, that is, she would have a bad death that would cast her life as bad. Such loneliness ‘is the experience of someone who is not just a drinker but also a colonial subject ... someone who knows that the wider world places no value on them’. Yet death may be used, as Babidge suggests, to consolidate what is seen as the source of some future, if not a brighter one. Funerals in Charters Towers are occasions in which ‘respect’ for ‘old people’ is both expected and manifest in performances that reinforce ‘family’. Even accusations of ‘disrespect’ have the effect of enmeshing people as family members, for their message is, ‘someone who belongs within the moral order of Murri family ... should act in ways that recognize and respect this’, elevating the moral authority derived from within Murriss’ shared experience over that which intrudes from outside that experience.

Death as Metaphor

Contemporary Indigenous Australians’ responses to death often seem to be expressions of desire, though perhaps these are not so much desires for the dead as for the living – to resuture the kin group rent by death, and to continue indigenous ways of being in a so-often-hostile world. In Redmond’s treatment of death and burial in the Northern Kimberley we are able to see a dual role for the dead, metaphorically standing first for threats of death to a way of life, then for the

possibility of resurrection or recreation of that life way. The movement of the dead from the first of these symbolic positions to the second is effected by the actions of those who create, organize and participate in the mortuary rituals. Redmond's account of a resuscitated practice, where the bones of the deceased are rubbed with red ochre and fat, much as a baby would be, then wrapped in a 'fleshy envelope' of paper-bark, associated with the feminine and the maternal, provides a clear example of the dual metaphor that bodies can play in contemporary rituals. On the one hand the body, now reduced to bones and returned to its maternal source, is understood as 'an enactment of the restoration of the dividual self'. On the other, the resuscitation of the tradition that so transforms the body speaks of indigenous desires for the continuation of tradition, however it might be imagined. Here the body clearly stands both for the person or self and for the larger collective; by attending to how this body is used, we may better know something of the politics of both (cf. Verdery 2004). Indeed, as Redmond remarks, 'every Aboriginal funeral in the Kimberley becomes a truly political event'.

The chapters by Davis and Smith also enable us to see indigenous beliefs and practices as attempts to sustain the continuity of persons and their life ways. Davis speaks of the 'ongoing reciprocal relationships between the dead and the living' that 'continue long after the final tombstone unveiling', a ceremony that itself creates 'the conditions for' these 'ongoing relationships'. As ghosts the dead may continue to visit family members, though they are 'regarded as living a full and complex life of their own', in the vicinity of the graveyard. There the dead may be visited by the living and entreated, as those who are 'closer to God', to intercede with the deity on their behalf.

However much it may be dismissed, Freud's (1917) 'work of mourning', the process of de-cathecting, detaching our emotions from the dead person, provides a framework of expectation about grieving processes, both for Western responses to loss and for anthropological interpretations of responses to death cross-culturally. Supplementing this framework with Derrida's ideas about hauntology – an indeterminate and interminable relationship with the dead and the past – Smith is able to rethink the ghosts who coexist with people in the township of Coen on Cape York Peninsula. The dangerous presence of the newly dead may be understood as a projection of feelings about abandonment on the part of the living; this is just one among myriad indications in this volume of the weight placed on sociality and its emphasis in responses to death. Once ghosts are settled, though still sometimes a source of unease, they are experienced as a vital presence in the social environment, a background presence that may 'clarify or make re-available knowledge for the living' or provide the fighting spirit needed in a contest with the government over land. Though ghosts should be removed from the vicinity of the living as they are when a house or place once inhabited by the dead is 'warmed', Smith has encountered what may be an emerging desire 'to keep the dead with us', a desire he sees arising from the uncertainty challenging Indigenous Australians today. At the same time it is the ghosts bringing the past to the present, speaking of

the 'deep attachments of Aboriginal people to country and kin', that may contain the seeds of a viable future.

We also see contemporary indigenous ways of dealing with death as expressions of an understanding of circumstances that are aptly described as dire when health and illness, life and death are used as a standard. This understanding may be manifest especially in displays of what we translate as 'grief'. Unexpected and premature deaths underline a characteristic of death more generally that many humans find disturbing: their powerlessness in the face of its inevitability and unpredictability. Elliott's account of the 'social death' of a living child forcibly removed from his Alyawarr family underlines what is undoubtedly a common experience for indigenous people, that of powerlessness vis-à-vis the encompassing polity. The engagement of Kwementyay Gunner's family in 'sorry business' as a means of 'forgetting' because 'they were worrying too much' exemplifies one way in which death may be used by indigenous people to both understand and control their circumstances. This example also begins to explain why death, more often perhaps than other life span transitions and associated rites of passage, seems to be used by indigenous people to understand what is happening to them today. Death as a metaphor for indigenous life is disturbingly and clearly apt.

What Indigenous Death Might Be

In his discussion of death at Yilpara in north-east Arnhem Land, Barber (Chapter 9) tells us he is 'reflecting on ... an ethnographic moment ... that may be slightly unusual'. This is the 'slow, controlled, decline of elderly men with some assistance from contemporary medicine ... occurring at home in the context of a largely functioning and supportive extended kin network'. In his account, Barber emphasizes that processes of dying and death – generally associated with deterioration and decay – can bring life to places and communities. While this understanding emerges from looking at these processes at Yilpara, Barber argues that dying and death play a role in the genesis and ongoing stability of places more generally. Reading his account, we may imagine a future in which indigenous people benefit from the best of both of their worlds. The willingness of kin, and the availability of Western palliative care, enabled three Madarrpa men to spend their last days at relative ease, 'on the shores of Blue Mud Bay in north-east Arnhem Land'. During his 18-month stay in this 'homeland community', Barber was impressed by its possibilities; violence was minimal, drinking, drug abuse and petrol sniffing were absent, and people, though dependent on welfare and Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) monies, were actively engaged in hunting, an activity seen as 'critical to the health, stability and viability of the homeland'. Barber believes Yilpara's potential is undergirded by people's anticipation of death. In part, this homeland was established because it would be the place 'where older people might want to live out their lives and ultimately die'. Residence at Yilpara would allow Madarrpa people to both live and die in their

own 'country'. The desire for 'autonomy and independence' that also motivated the homeland community's establishment may be seen as characteristic of these deaths. Who among us would not wish for similar circumstance at our own life's end?

In this context, where the well-being of indigenous and non-indigenous people in Australia continues to diverge, the importance of the chapters between the covers of this book cannot be overestimated; each provides us with new facets for understanding how the intricate sociality associated with death in Indigenous Australia may be providing resilience to populations under duress, as well as exacerbating the conditions of stress experienced by Indigenous Australians today. In reading mortuary practices as symbols of a struggle for the preservation of indigenous lives and identity, the contributors to this volume enable us to see things in a different light: we begin to see more clearly the ultimate price that is paid, and how it is paid, by those who occupy the lowest rungs of the global social hierarchy.

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