

## **An experimental grammar of relations with agentive dead**

**Marc-Antoine Berthod**, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland (HES-SO), ORCID: 0000-0002-3112-1556

### **Abstract**

The relationship between the living and the dead has been the subject of numerous studies, which show a wide variety of ways in which this relationship has developed over time and in different socio-cultural contexts. Whether through the materiality of the remains of the deceased or the entities they have become over time, such as spirits or other ghosts, these relationships are deployed in various directions depending on the purpose pursued by the living. This article looks at the agentive part of the dead that underlies these relationships and drives the living to act in one or other of these directions. To this end, it first examines the way in which the notion of agency is mobilized in certain theoretical and empirical approaches. It then sketches out an experimental grammar of relations between the living and the dead, a grammar that makes it possible to identify and situate the intervention of more or less specialized intermediaries, likely to make this agentive part of the dead effective.

**KEYWORDS:** death, entities, corpses, relational agency, anthropology

### **Introduction: The becoming of the dead**

The relationship between the living and the dead has always been a subject of universal reflection, nourishing numerous philosophical and religious traditions and underpinning a diversity of individual and collective practices relating to the existential questions raised by death (Davies, 2002). From the mid-19th century onwards, the social sciences and anthropology in particular began to develop and publish works that stood out for their scientific aim and knowledge of the field (Berthod, 2007a; 2005); empirical research has since documented, organized and theorized the social, cultural and political components of a society's relationship with its dead (Engelke, 2019; Palgi & Abramovitch,

1984). The ambition is to grasp, on the one hand, the way in which individuals assign a place to the deceased on a symbolic and relational level—which is very often reflected in the transformation of the status of the dead into “ancestors” or any other “surviving entity” as well as in conceptions of the afterlife (Godelier, 2014)—and, on the other hand, the spatial, temporal and material fates of bodies and human remains: burial, graves, cemeteries, temporary or permanent funerary spaces (Laqueur, 2018).

With regard to the first point, a large body of literature is now seeking to renew the understanding of bereavement experiences. It aims to demonstrate that links with the deceased do not have to be severed, but that they can continue in another form (Neimeyer, 2001), leading to a redefinition of the nature and meaning of relationships between the living and the dead. As for the second point, relating to the materialities of death, debates often focus on what the remains of the deceased make the living do, which invites us to reflect on the configurations of gestures and practices woven with the imaginaries of death (Mencej, 2021; Verdery, 1999). Basically, do the dead act on the living? If so, with what status? In this article, I propose to shed some light on these questions, by putting the notion of agency of the dead into perspective. Indeed, this notion—which generally denotes their capacity to act—seems to subsume both aspects in a good number of contemporary works: it operates paradigmatically, explicitly or implicitly, to determine not only the place of the dead in interactions between living people, but also the ontological quality of the deceased.

To achieve this, I am going to draw on some research from psychology, philosophy and anthropology, some of which lies at the intersection of these disciplines. I also refer to the empirical studies carried out by various anthropologists and to those I have conducted—mainly in the French-speaking world, on my own and as part of a team—over the last twenty years, in particular on clairvoyance and mediumship practices, as well as on funerals and mourning, especially for the elderly<sup>1</sup>. I begin by commenting on different ways of conceiving and operationalizing the agency of the dead, which helps to mark out the perimeter of the diversity of relations between the living and the dead. Experimentally, I then propose an outline of a relational grammar between those two categories, while defining the role of certain actors in the implementation of this grammar.

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to stress that this text does not present the results of a specific research project. In the form of an essay, it seeks to thematize the notion of the agency of the dead, central to the conference *The Agency of the Dead in the Lives of Individuals: Experience and Conceptualization* held between August 30 and September 1, 2024 at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana, at which these reflections were presented in a communication. This was an opportunity to look back at various fieldwork I had carried out, in which the notion of agency had not been conceptualized as such, hence the present attempt to identify, in particular, the extent to which this notion could subsume a set of reflections engaged on the relations between the living and the dead in different empirical frameworks.

The aim of the article is to grasp schematically both the place of dead bodies and that of the entities that survive them in the relations between the living and the dead, in order to appreciate the anthropological significance of the latter's agency.

### **Maintaining relations with the dead**

Let us start with the approaches that, over the last thirty years or so, have supported the importance for bereaved people of continuing a relationship with the dead. In their article tracing Western theoretical conceptions of bereavement, Rothaupt and Becker (2007) describe the gradual change characterizing interpretations of bereavement and, by extension, the clinical and therapeutic approaches that follow. At a glance, we have moved on from the Freudian concept of detaching oneself from one's ties with the deceased, through grief work to recognize and accept the loss, to the constructivist concept of preserving these same ties, which are bound to change over time; the aim, above all, is to give them meaning. In this new perspective, there are no longer any specific stages or tasks to complete in order to "end" a bereavement, but rather actions and conceptions that gradually converge to maintain a relationship once it has been marked by the death of one of the two parties. As Rothaupt and Becker point out, "clearly, the field is moving toward a more growth-oriented paradigm of bereavement" (2007, p. 9).

My purpose here is not so much to comment on this theoretical change as to highlight one of its empirical consequences. Indeed, this change has led to a renewed look at a whole range of practices and concepts relating to death and dying. For example, impressions of being in the presence of the deceased, voices heard in the absence of a physical person or visions of the dead are no longer interpreted as mere fictions, potentially problematic or even pathological illusions. On the contrary, these elements are analyzed as a set of manifestations likely to testify to the continuity of a relationship transformed by death. This basically normalizes an important statistical reality within the general population, as Klugman (2006) has shown after documenting Post Death Contacts (PDC) through a study conducted via a telephone survey of 81 questions in Nevada, United States<sup>2</sup>. These PDC correspond to the feeling that a given individual has that a dead person is in contact with him or her, like Carol, a bereaved woman quoted by Klugman at the beginning of his article:

I feel like my grandmother's been following me around and helping to protect me. Because I've done some pretty stupid things in my life and some of the

---

<sup>2</sup> The study has some recruitment biases that limit the scope of the results. Of the 202 eligible completed surveys, there is an overrepresentation of women (72.8%) and Caucasian respondents (79.7%).

things I should have almost died from, or should have died from and I didn't. So I feel like she's had a hand in that somehow. Either a voice or a force or something that, that pulled me away or that said something at the last minute or at the right moment and had me make another choice (2006, p. 249).

Taking up this quote, I would like to highlight two central points. First, the feeling of being in the presence of a dead person—"Carol is not alone"—denotes the possibility of a specific relationship. The dead's presence is justified for a good reason, in this case for protection. Second, the direction of agency—not only the direction of action, but also and above all the direction of the solicitation for a relationship: "her grandmother reached out to her". Based on numerous examples of this type, Klugman's quantitative study categorizes the ways in which such relationships between the living and the dead are said to be established: through smells, sounds, actions, associations of ideas or coincidences. In particular, the study shows gender differences depending on the category: for example, hearing voices, a footstep or having the impression of being touched is more prevalent among women, while men tend to mention chemical odors. Beyond these gender variables—and variables relating to educational level or economic capacity could also be mentioned—it is worth noting that this type of study aims above all to formulate hypotheses on the strengthening and maintenance of the bond with the deceased, sometimes over many years. Thus, according to the theoretical approach of "continuing bonds", it is above all such "inner relationships" that count and enable the interpretation of grief experiences.

But if it is nothing more than a kind of inner dialogue between ourselves and our representation of a dead person, can we still speak of a "relationship"? Philosopher Kathrin Norlock, professor at the University of Trent in Canada, has attempted to answer this question from a feminist perspective without, however, placing her examples in their social or cultural context. In her article, she introduces an ethical perspective that translates as follows: "Yet it is difficult to find work interrelating the efforts of metaphysicians and ethicists, especially when attempting to settle questions in ethics, such as whether one can forgive the dead, or whether one must respect the wishes of the dead or honor their memories" (2016, p. 342). For the action of a single individual cannot attest to reciprocity or mutuality: is forgiveness granted to a dead person effective in this sense if it is not validated or simply heard by the latter? By drawing on relationships with the dead, Norlock aims to go beyond the representation of moral processes as solely internal mental representations of an individual. She supports the idea that relationships with the dead remain meaningful even if there is no longer any effective reciprocity.

In particular, it is the interactions and links established before the death that will nourish and maintain the imaginal contents of the grieving person. Norlock argues that these contents support a whole range of new actions and interactions undertaken by the latter:

Much of what it means for a relationship to be more than merely imaginary, to be predicated on past reciprocity or responsive activities, will turn on the material facts of the memories and interactions that support the imaginal content, including previous reciprocity or mutuality in a relationship (2016, p. 344).

She believes that the dead continue to exert an influence that, in a way, exceeds the internal dialogue between an individual and his or her representation of the dead. It is this influence that offers a way out of the notion that the relationship between the living and the dead is merely fictional: "I argue that ongoing activities of remembering and imagination inform the real relationship; in short, just because a relationship with the dead is imaginal, doesn't mean it isn't very real" (2016, p. 345). This argument reveals a conception of the agency of the dead that is not specific or intrinsic to them, says Norlock, but situational and contextual: "The imaginal relationship is the reason that the real relationship is valuable to the bereaved, because we build up and rest our actions and attitudes on the importance of our memories and thoughts about the dead" (2016, p. 355). In this sense, forgiving the dead is seen as an imaginal aspect of an ongoing relationship that carries real meaning.

### **The (in)ability of the dead to act**

In other words, the dead have a certain consistency, insofar as they retain a relational capacity to act on the living. This concept echoes that recently developed by Gregory Delaplace (2024). In *La voix des fantômes. Quand débordent les morts* [The voice of ghosts. When the dead overflow, my translation], this French anthropologist draws on a large amount of empirical work on the treatment of dead bodies and relations with the deceased in different societies to establish an ethnography of relations between the dead and the living. Contrary to the presuppositions of a moral and social obligation to develop these relationships and maintain the memory of the deceased at all costs, he stresses the importance of forgetting them too: "It turns out that concern for the dead is above all, from one place or era to another, a protocol of voluntary amnesia, a deliberate and sometimes virtuoso effort at 'demomeration'" (2024, p. 22 [my translation from French]). The key here is the ability of societies to organize, both in the funeral ritual involving the treatment of the remains and during the mourning process, a collective accompaniment of individual loss that oscillates between remembering and forgetting, a

capacity that can vary greatly from one pole to another depending on cultural and social contexts.

By highlighting this double movement, Delaplace invites us to reflect on the status that the dead occupy in these relationships. He points out that the dead are generally perceived in a passive way; that they are like objects manipulated by the living according to their sole expectations and needs. Reversing this point of view, Delaplace instead wants to show the active face of the dead, by envisaging them as subjects: “Rather than simply questioning the variability of the ways in which the living care for their dead, I shall show what kind of beings and what kind of interlocutors the latter are encouraged to become by the former” (2024, p. 24 [my translation from French]). Without going so far as to attribute a subjectivity to the dead, this anthropologist wants to emphasize their active component, which expresses itself in various forms, particularly that of ghosts: “I propose not to exclude a priori the possibility that the dead can exist, as beings and as agents—in fact, as subjects—beyond the desires of the living to establish them as such” (2024, p. 28 [my translation from French]). As with Norlock (2016), however, the dead cannot exist autonomously: they are always dependent on the living and the dispositives within which they are instituted. The dead do, nevertheless, offer resistance. They can overflow the frameworks that contain them. In this case, they need to be “educated”, to use Delaplace’s expression.

What I wish to emphasize with the references mobilized so far, is the contemporary convergence between a psychological approach centered on the relevance of “continuing bonds”, a philosophical argument defending the real signification of the relationships that the living maintain with the dead, and an anthropological posture that states—albeit in a conditional or even residual manner—a capacity for action on the part of the latter, at least some of them. This convergence is emblematically reflected in the work of Vinciane Despret (2015, 2023), who for several years has been interested in the effect of the dead, in their action. Here, agency is situated neither in the subjectivity of the mourner nor in the deceased entity as such, but in the actions and interactions between the living. In short, Despret is interested in the way in which the dead make the living do things, as developed in her work published in 2023 and entitled *Les morts à l’œuvre* [*The Dead in Action; my translation from French*].

In it, Despret analyzes the processes involved in the creation of artistic works commissioned by French and Belgian collectives who mobilize in the name of a deceased person, for example, to honor what that person might have become. It is a way of concretizing, through the intermediary of the living, aspirations expressed but interrupted too

quickly, or too soon. This is how some of the dead “insist”, to quote Despret, a term that here explicitly denotes a certain idea of the agency of the dead. This “insistence” translates into the mobilization of a plurality of individuals who attempt to bring about the imagined future of a dead person: “[...] it is undeniable that, for everyone involved in these stories, the dead still have their say, and their share of the work to do. By delegation, of course, but they are present because they are well represented” (Despret, 2023, p. 21 [my translation from French]). The unaccomplished achievements of some of the dead have thus become the task of those who survive them, as in the case of a brother of the deceased who loved fishing: “I don’t know what the right moment will be, but I know I’ll go fishing for him, whereas without him I won’t” (Despret, 2023, p. 56-57 [my translation from French]). In other words, the dead “push” the living to act and help shape the latter’s own accomplishments.

### **And what about the body?**

While the place of the dead body is addressed in Delaplace, it disappears in Despret<sup>3</sup>. With the latter, the remains of the deceased are detached, or at least not thematized, from the entity that the deceased has become for the mourners, and which makes the living act. The agency of the dead therefore seems reduced to its symbolic and relational components; in other words, it does without bodies. However, it is possible to turn to another set of works to understand that the materiality of the deceased may just as well be the primary locus of this agency. Crossland (2017), for example, has analyzed the tendencies of forensic anthropology to consider human remains as “agentive”. From this perspective, a dead body “speaks”, “testifies” or “bears witness”. With its ambiguous ontological status between “subject” and “object”,

the dead body provides a productive site for thinking about how agency works in relation to people and things. Particularly in moments when the corpse is found outside of its proper place in the tomb, it seems to harbor some kind of problematic animacy that may be expressed as hauntings, dreams, or, as I show here, in ways that are channeled through a language of science and evidence (2017, p. 181).

---

<sup>3</sup> Delaplace (2024) refers in particular to the classic works of the anthropology of death, notably those of Robert Hertz (1905-1906), which highlight the importance of the interweaving between the trajectories of the remains of the deceased, that of the entity they become – in this case, ancestralization – and that of mourning communities in comparing the funerary practices of different societies and continents; he also draws on his own ethnographic work conducted in Mongolia. While this articulation remains central to many funeral and mourning practices, it cannot always be deployed effectively, and therefore covers only part of the relationship between the living and the dead.

Here we find again the idea of both Delaplace and Despret that the dead overflow the contexts that ordinarily frame them, thus justifying the interest in mobilizing the notion of agency.

For Crossland, who bases her reflections on various theoretical and empirical works in forensic archaeology and anthropology, particularly in relation to Bosnia-Herzegovina, the rhetorical figure of the “speaking corpse” is very useful for establishing a certain legitimacy, or even scientific authority. Many forensic anthropologists claim that the bodies of the deceased never lie; that they convey the truth of the facts to be deciphered. In other words, it is a matter of having the dead speak as if they were speaking for themselves. As Crossland points out, the researcher occupies the position of an expert who restricts himself to deciphering things, while concealing the interpretative aspect that this deciphering entails. But this part cannot be completely erased because if the body has to speak, it always does so for a specific reason: to identify a violent act, for example.

Basically, the active component of dead bodies—even if it appears metaphorically in scientific discourse—is merely the starting point or fulcrum for the establishment of facts which, like the administration of evidence to denounce a crime, always require a broader context:

This is to move away from a view of agency as inhering only in the living, and instead to view it as a collaborative semiotic project that is also shaped and constrained by the dead. The goals of prosecution and justice cannot be carried out without them. The image of the testifying corpse recognizes these agentic dimensions (Crossland, 2017, p. 188).

In this case, it is the body, rather than the entity that survives it, that becomes the vehicle and pivot of an active capacity that is actualized not only in relations between the living, but also in relations between the living and the dead. As Crossland again points out,

to move away from a folk understanding of the agency of the dead and to fully engage with the ability of the dead to intervene in the lives of the living needs a theory of agency that is fundamentally relational, while also able to recognize the ways in which that relationality can be hewn and circumscribed (2017, p. 188).

While these trends can be observed in forensic scientific discourse, they can also be found to a large extent in the empirical descriptions of anthropologists who have long been interested in the political uses of dead bodies. The work of Verdery (1999) is a perfect example, even if the term agency is not explicitly used. With a particular focus on the reburials of emblematic figures, especially patriotic and religious ones, in Eastern



European countries after the fall of the socialist regimes, Verdery shows how much “a body’s materiality can be critical to its symbolic efficacy” (1999, p. 27). By demanding the re-interment of certain dead, some of whom died centuries ago, a community engages in a power struggle between groups or factions that will make them speak for themselves. As Verdery suggests, these deaths “are thus excellent means for accumulating something essential to political transformations: symbolic capital. [...] Dead bodies, in short, can be a site of political profit” (1999, p. 33).

In so doing, the living confront moral, religious, nationalistic or patriotic arguments, attempting to endorse and articulate them with the personality of the deceased, which is at the same time revisited, sometimes thoroughly. Dead bodies—not only when they are in their whole form, but also when they are fragmented or even distributed in different places—become the pivot of a political performativity based on attempts to crystalize the personality or even the identity of the deceased, which in turn serve to promote and affirm a new moral order in a given society. As Verdery puts it, “[...] my argument throughout this book concerns how we might think of legitimation in less rationalistic and more suitably “cosmic” terms, showing it as rich, complex, and disputatious processes of political meaning-creation—that is, as politics animated” (1999, p. 52). In my opinion, this political performativity linked to the use of dead bodies can be compared to the generic concept of the agency of the dead mentioned in the former sections.

### **Outline of a relational grammar between the living and the dead**

Contemporary reflections on the relationship between the living and the dead suggest that a certain capacity for action on the part of the former deserves to be taken into account in the study of these relationships from an anthropological point of view. Thus, it is no longer possible to associate the dead with fictitious dialogues of the *entre-soi* or with mere delusion; but neither is it necessary to assert that the dead have an existence of their own. In other words, the notion of agency is used to apprehend one or other facet of the relationship between the living and the dead, and to define its specificity. This remains possible wherever this part of agency is located, in the entity it represents or in the materiality of the human remains that underlie it, or even at the articulation of the two. For this agentive part is always conditioned by the actions and interactions between living individuals.

That said, there is one aspect that remains little addressed in these different approaches: the direction of agency, as mentioned earlier with Klugman’s example, and its importance on the action of the individuals. Indeed, between the living and the dead—and it

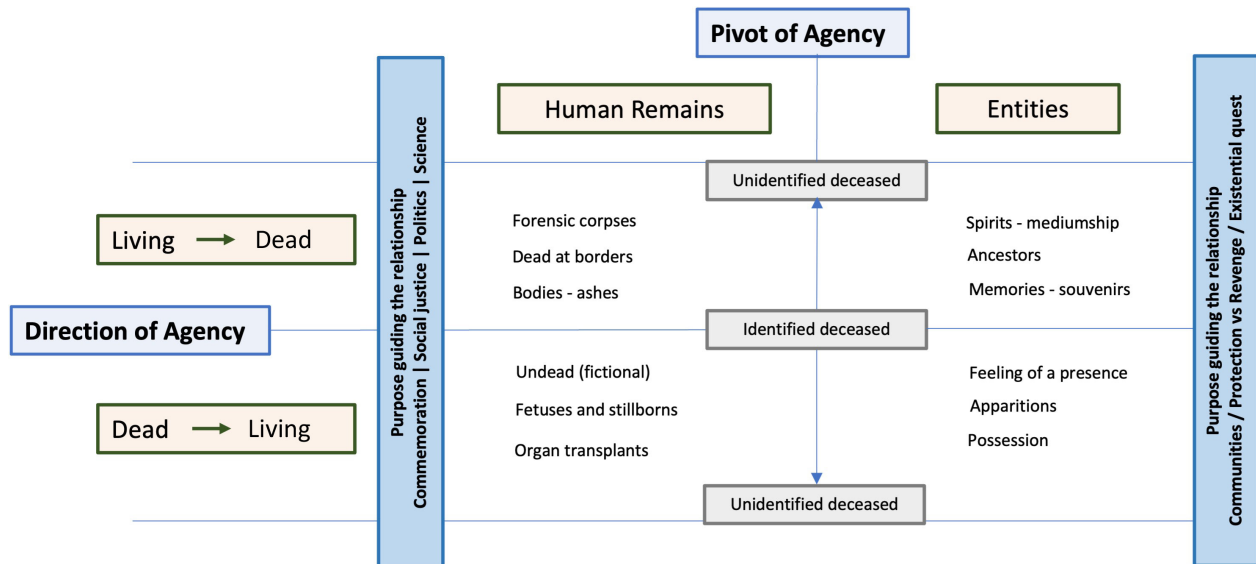
is enough here to keep to the sole point of view of the living—who contacts whom, and when? Who is authorized to make contact, and who is not? How does one enter and leave contact? Who is entitled to interrupt or prolong contact? Identifying the direction of this agency makes it possible, on the one hand, to map the contextual diversity of relationships between the living and the dead, and, on the other, to identify the teleological dimension of these relationships, i.e. their purpose. This allows for the establishment of a kind of typology or grammar, useful for analyzing not only the logics of action and justifications underlying relations between the living and the agentive dead, but also the type of actors who make these relations effective and their role in them.

Schema 1 attempts to depict these variations in the relationship between the living and the dead, and their interpretations. A first axis, vertical, distinguishes the support or pivot of agency, on the one hand the body or materiality of the remains, on the other the “entity” that the person has become after death. As I mentioned earlier, these two supports for agency are not mutually exclusive. A second, horizontal axis concerns the direction of agency. It defines whether the solicitation of the relation—the initiative to contact, the control of it, or even the will to end it—is considered to be determined by a dead or a living person. The direction of agency can influence the type of actions and interactions to be undertaken and, above all, the type of actors involved in actualizing such relations between the living and the dead, which I will develop in the next section.

To further refine the distribution of relationship types, a third axis is introduced, starting from the center and distributing both upwards and downwards on the schema, to locate the degree of identification of the deceased, both in his or her bodily dimension and in his or her spiritual or transcendent dimension. The schema can therefore be read as follows: at the intersection of the axes, at the most central point, the agentive part of a dead person clearly identified and recognized by the living is located both in his remains and in his postmortem entity. Conversely, the further from the center, the greater the effort required by the living to ascertain or establish the identity of the dead. Basically, this provides an indication of the kind of grammar that helps distribute the diversity of relationships that can be observed from an empirical point of view.

## Schema 1

### *Pivot and direction of agency of the dead*



In the top left-hand square, there are situations in which the pivot of agency is the body in its material dimension, and it is the living who seek to make the dead speak or act. As mentioned above, this is the case for archeo-anthropologists, who seek to retrace the social role of the deceased by analyzing human bones and remains found in a wide variety of burial sites; these remains, as well as the material structures that shelter them, are all clues to be interpreted in order to reconstruct the fate of the deceased and, if possible, his or her place in a community (Bocquentin et al., 2022). This can be done on the basis of the remains of people whose identity is more or less known, so that the analyses will focus on the relationships between the living and the dead according to a whole range of identifiable characteristics, such as gender, age or social rank, primarily for scientific purposes. But the agential aspect of the dead modifies the relational horizon when the identification of the dead becomes an issue of reparation or social justice. In this perspective, I can mention the moral obligations that underlie the technical work of identifying human remains in the aftermath of air disasters in France (Clavandier, 2022) or collective mobilizations to identify people who have died at the border between Mexico and the United States, and give them a decent burial, (Delano & Nienass, 2016) or in Italy in relation to the crossings of the Mediterranean sea for example (Kobelinsky et al., 2021). In other circumstances, the deceased are very well identified; actions are then tak-

en on their behalf, for political (Verdery, 1999), family or personal reasons, particularly when a cinerary urn is held at home in the Netherlands, for example (Mathijssen, 2017).

In the bottom left-hand square, still on the left, I locate situations in which the dead take the initiative in the relationship. The first example I would like to mention is unusual in that the corporeal dimension is a determining factor, but in a way that is above all fictional and narrative. It corresponds to all those vernacular accounts in which the dead—often clearly identified, like Dracula, or zombies who have taken on the body of a specific individual—come to haunt as “undead” the world of the living, prompting the latter to act, somewhat in spite of themselves, notably in contexts related to Northern or Eastern Europe (Kanerva & Koski, 2019). In other circumstances, the materiality of bodies does seem to be at the origin of an action, as in perinatal bereavement, where fetuses or stillborn babies have no social identity of their own. This does not prevent some people from offering them a place in family configurations and maintaining a certain type of relationship; sensitivities in this regard have in fact evolved, at least in Western countries, since stillborn babies can now benefit from a burial, a funeral ceremony and commemorative practices (Charrier & Clavandier, 2019). Moreover, we can mention the special case of transplant patients, who live with the organ of another deceased person whose identity remains unknown as shown, for example, in Soana’s article (2022), which takes a philosophical approach while drawing on personal experience.

Then, if we situate the support of agency in the immateriality of entities (“spirits”, “souls”, “ghosts” to name a few), we first have a set of relationships in which the living seek contact with the dead (top-right of Figure 1). But relationships between the living and the dead also vary here, depending on the degree to which people are identified. There are, for example, clairvoyance and mediumship practices through which it is a question of defining, during consultation sessions in particular, the dead person with whom contact is sought, as I was able to observe and analyze during a field study of divinatory practices carried out in French-speaking Switzerland (Berthod, 2007b). It is also possible to include in this part of the schema the relationships that are established with more ancestral figures, often religious, following the example of saints, and with known and well-identified deceased loved ones, sometimes on a collective basis, as shown by the work of Despret (2015, 2023), or more personally, through any action aimed at maintaining the link with the deceased person (Maddrell, 2013). Finally, in the bottom right-hand corner, it is the dead who take the initiative, when an individual expresses a sense of the presence of a deceased person, as mentioned earlier with the example of Carol, cited with Klugman’s study (2006). But one can also think of unexpected

apparitions of religious or spiritual figures: the Virgin Mary, ghosts that roam certain territories or haunt houses, or of entities that take possession of a living individual's body as attested to in various periods of European history (De Certeau, 2016). Here again, the purpose of the relationship between the living and the dead can change depending on whether the dead are more or less known and identified.

Through this schema, which remains a prototype working and experimental version, I would formulate the hypothesis that the issues at stake in relations between the living and the dead are more of a political and scientific nature, or even of social justice, when the pivot of agency of the dead is rather the dead body and its materiality. When the pivot of the agency is immaterial, we are likely to find ourselves in the register of spiritual or existential quest, in collective and community control of the relationship to belief, in strategies for protecting the living or for revenge, or even for reparation for a singular death considered unjust, violent or unexpected. On the other hand, as regards the direction of the agentic component of the dead, it is more a question of a trend, with things possibly reversing or intertwining over time. For such a schema must not be considered solely in static terms. To assess its relevance, we need to highlight not only the actors who make such a grammar operational, but also the temporal dimension that is central to understanding whether or not the articulation between the body of the deceased and the entity the latter has become after death is maintained.

### **The actors in this grammar and the importance of temporality**

Basically, this schema offers a snapshot of the relational variations between the living and the dead, according to differentiated conceptions of the latter's agentic component. However, it does not take into account the role of the individuals who make these relationships effective, nor the temporality in which these relationships develop. It is therefore important to go beyond its static dimension. Thus, we need to identify the actors who make these relationships effective and the settings in which they occur, according to their temporality. By looking at interactions and situations through the lens of empirical research, it becomes possible to see how these actors engage with these components of agency, perform them and enhance their intensity; to see how, in situations and over time, the agency of the dead is interpreted and how it serves to organize and prioritize actions, and to generate or sustain emotions: fear, anxiety, relief, comfort. Empirical work is required to see how the relationship with the dead is constructed, not only as a function of the supports of their agency, between the materiality of the body and the

person it represents in all its forms, but also as a function of the direction, and possible changes in direction through time, of this agency.

To illustrate these aspects, I will rely on two examples of fieldwork carried out in French-speaking Switzerland. The first, conducted at the turn of the 2000s, concerns the clairvoyance and mediumship practices mentioned above, while the second, completed in 2025, focuses on the organization of funerals for loved ones by the elderly, and their mourning during the first year following the death. About psychics first: between 1997 and 2003, as part of my doctorate in anthropology, I explored the way in which certain individuals claimed to develop a sense of self-extension and, at times, contact with the deceased, who could communicate with mourners through them (Berthod, 2007b). As I was particularly interested in the life paths of these clairvoyants, I was able to show that many of them had been marked during periods of both primary and secondary socialization by a form of vulnerability: illnesses, separations, multiple losses. Their commitment to psychic and mediumistic practices has enabled these clairvoyants to cope with, and even overcome, certain personal frailties. Invested in a form of existential quest, they have accumulated life experience, gained confidence in their ability to offer advice to others, and developed a mediumistic or divinatory practice. Through their words, their own bodies, the materiality of objects or signs perceived within their environment, psychics could mention the presence of the deceased and seek to provoke the feeling of being in their presence during interactions with their clients, as with me as a researcher. The agential component of the dead is performed in these specific moments with varying degrees of effectiveness and intensity, according to the interaction that takes place between a psychic and his or her client (Berthod, 2007c).

Very rarely, however—and I never documented this during my fieldwork—was such agency articulated or even mentioned with the body of the deceased who was said to be identified; the physical remains were irrelevant and unimportant. Consequently, the ideas that could be worked on from this first example are as follows: the further one moves away from the actual event of death, the more the agential component of the deceased will tend to dissociate between the materiality of the bodies on the one hand, and the entities they would have become on the other. Moreover, this agential component takes on specific characteristics that require the intervention of different types of intermediaries in the relationship that is established between the living and the dead. These intermediaries, as well as their training and the purposes of their interventions, vary and consequently tend to specialize not only according to the pivot of agency, but also according to the direction of this agency. For example, a clairvoyant may be called in to

try to identify and bring together a deceased person and one of his or her loved ones, in order to help overcome a bereavement; conversely, a scientist capable of analyzing or even identifying human remains may intervene in order to establish certain facts and, in some cases, help fight injustice.

It should be noted, however, that these situations tend to be unconventional, not to say extraordinary, if we consider the whole range of relations between the living and the dead. In the majority of cases indeed, the intervention of such intermediary figures that are being able to perform or actualize the agential part of the dead is neither required nor desired. At the time of death, a group of funeral and mortuary professionals, and even volunteers or members of religious or cultural communities, intervene to care for the body of the deceased, prepare it for the funeral and the burial or the scattering of ashes. The link between the body of the deceased and the dead that this body is destined to become, especially when the latter is clearly identified—in short, when we are in the heart of Schema 1—remains strong, without this presupposing the long-term maintenance of a relationship between the living and this particular dead person.

With my colleague Alexandre Pillonel, we have conducted ethnographic research<sup>4</sup>, using observation and repeated in-depth interviews, on the funeral transition underway in many European countries (Cuchet et al., 2023), and on the bereavement experience of people over eighty years old. We followed these elderly persons from the moment they learned of the death of a loved one and had to organize his or her funeral (Pillonel & Berthod, submitted). We then conducted several interviews during their first year of mourning and, as far as possible, with their next of kin and proxies. In these interviews, it is interesting to note that the body of the deceased can inspire the bereaved to act: Ernest, who lost his sister in 2023 at the age of eighty, goes to the cemetery once a week to visit her; it is an opportunity for him to stay active and continue driving his car. Ernest also says he talks to his sister on these occasions, and sometimes at her home too, inwardly; he feels, however, that the direction of agency is one-sided: it is never his sister who contacts him; and he does not think she can have any influence on his actions.

Conversely, John, who is eighty-seven and was interviewed four times between summer 2022 and spring 2023, says “he listens to his wife when it comes to making important

---

<sup>4</sup> Project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), no 192750 (<https://data.snf.ch/grants/grant/192750>), between April 2021 and March 2025. The fieldwork took place in three cantons of French-speaking Switzerland: Geneva, Neuchâtel and Vaud. Access to the elderly was provided in collaboration with private and public funeral directors, some of whom were partners in the research project. We attended 48 customer interviews with funeral directors, and made more than 50 observations on the preparation of bodies in dedicated funeral spaces, farewell ceremonies, burials, urn deliveries and the scattering of ashes. We carried out 33 interviews with various types of funeral professionals and 52 interviews with people over eighty, whom we met up to four times during their first year of bereavement, as well as with any relatives concerned and interested in taking part in the study.

decisions". He also visits her grave regularly; however, these become less frequent with time. The relationship with the deceased then takes on a more relational dimension, and no longer needs to be so clearly articulated with the materiality of the body over time. In other words, the people interviewed keep the memory of the deceased alive in their domestic and intimate spaces, relying in particular on memory supports such as objects or clothes that once belonged to the deceased. Here, the agentive part of the deceased remains weakly present and little mobilized, especially for individuals whose social networks tend to shrink with advancing age; this part seems above all to be triggered in this inner relationship that the bereaved person maintains with the departed and, more rarely, with the people who have known and shared an affectionate bond with him or her. In these "ordinary" bereavement situations, intermediaries specializing in the management of relations between the living and the dead are usually not solicited, as long as they have been taken care of by the funeral directors and are given a final resting place.

### **Conclusion : Relations to the dead and anthropology of grief**

From these short illustrations, drawn from different fieldwork settings, the following two comments might finally be suggested: in many situations, a work of "demomeration" takes place, as previously alluded to with Delaplace (2024), so that relationships with the dead become distended and sometimes disappear or are simply no longer maintained (Varjakoski, 2019). In this case, the agentive part of the dead is not particularly important, as it is part of an "ordinary" form of the mourning experience; it arises occasionally, in the relationships that mourners may have with the deceased via personal memories, various material supports and objects, and through inner dialogues or interactions with people who also knew the deceased or shared emotional ties with him or her.

In some cases, however, links are maintained well beyond affinity circles and "overflow" the usual institutional frameworks, so that the intervention of actors specialized in managing the agentive part of relations between the living and the dead is required. This agentive part becomes an issue that is then expressed in a more sustained way and with greater intensity. This is particularly apparent when the finality of these relationships emerges or imposes itself on a bereaved person or within a given collective. This purpose may vary according to the circumstances of the death or the location of the remains: to make reparation for a death perceived as unjust or violent; to identify a deceased person in order to return them to their loved ones and organize a funeral that has been prevented for a shorter or longer period of time; to give a place and meaning to the



ashes that are kept at home; to make contact with the spirit of a dead person in order to understand a grieving experience, etc. Depending on the interpretation of the relational purpose between the living and the dead, the actors mobilized will also vary. Moreover, the latter go through clearly differentiated channels of training or initiation, which highlights the way in which relations between the living and the dead are likely to be distributed and activated in a given socio-cultural space.

Secondly, the further in time one moves away from the moment of death and the funeral, the more the agentive part that can be observed in relations between the living and the dead is likely to fragment between, on the one hand, the materiality of human remains and, on the other, the entity that these deceased have become. Perhaps this is what allows certain individuals to specialize and intervene at very specific times and according to very specific needs in these relationships between the living and the dead. From this perspective, these individuals can be distinguished not only according to the pivot of the agency of the dead, but also according to the direction of this agency, as I suggested schematically earlier. Or they could combine their skills.

In conclusion, the establishment—albeit still provisional and experimental—of such a relational grammar between the living and the dead, articulated to the notion of agency in relation with the actors who epitomize it, might contribute to an anthropology of bereavement that combines the material and immaterial dimensions of death, in a more or less long-term temporal perspective. This approach also makes it possible to enlarge psychological conceptions, notably those of “continuing bonds”, which almost exclusively apprehend the experience of grief from the point of view of the person’s interiority. This approach also takes into account the sociological and cultural elements that mark the individual experience of mourning in its various forms. While this anthropology of bereavement is certainly still in the making, it is already widely perceptible in the numerous research studies that today refer to the notion of agency of the dead – even in the broadest sense – in their empirical work.

### **AI disclaimer**

The author declares that no generative artificial intelligence was used in the preparation of this manuscript.

## References

- Berthod, M.-A. (2005). La vie des morts dans le regard des anthropologues. *Anthropos. Revue Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Linguistique*, 100(2), 521-536. <https://mort-anthropologie.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/La-vie-des-morts-Berthod.pdf>
- Berthod, M.-A. (2007a). Mort et vif. Penser le statut paradoxal des défunts. In Chappaz S., Monsutti A., & Schinz O. (Eds.), *Entre ordre et subversion. Logiques, alternatives, écarts, paradoxes*. (pp. 189-201). Karthala. <https://mort-anthropologie.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Mort-et-vif-Berthod.pdf>
- Berthod, M.-A. (2007b). *Doutes, croyances et divination. Une étude anthropologique de l'expérience divinatoire en Suisse romande*. Antipodes. <https://doi.org/10.4000/assr.18743>
- Berthod, M.-A. (2007c). Deviner, diagnostiquer, prédire: La désarmante incertitude des devins. In Rossi I. (Ed.), *Prévoir et prédire la maladie. De la divination au pronostic* (pp. 61-78). Aux Lieux d'Etre. <https://mort-anthropologie.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/La-désarmante-incertitude-des-devins-Berthod.pdf>
- Berthod, M.-A. (2015). L'indiscipline conceptuelle des rites: Enjeux interprétatifs en thanatologie. In Jeffrey D. & Cardita A. (Eds.), *La fabrication des rites* (pp. 29-48). Presses de l'Université Laval.
- Bocquentin, F., Kacki, S., Buquet-Marcon, C., Schotsmans, E., Goudiaby, H., & Noûs, C. (2022). Appréhender la frontière entre vivants et morts dans l'archéo-anthropologie. *Bulletins et mémoires de la société d'anthropologie de Paris*, 34(1), 4-7. <https://doi.org/10.4000/bmsap.9878>
- Charrier, P., & Clavandier, G. (2019). Ephemeral materiality: a place for lifeless infants in cemeteries. *Mortality*, 24(2), 193–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2019.1585785>
- Clavandier, G. (2022). From technical measures to moral obligations: The management and fate of fragmented human remains following disasters. The case of a plane crash in France in 2015. *Death Studies*, 47(6), 655-665. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2022.2131050>
- Crossland, Z. (2017). The Agency of the Dead. In Enfield, N. J. & Kockelman, P. (Eds.), *Distributed Agency* (pp. 181-190). Oxford University Press.
- Cuchet, G., Laubry, N., & Lauwers, M. (Eds.) (2023). *Transitions funéraires en Occident. Une histoire des relations entre morts et vivants de l'Antiquité à nos jours*. École française de Rome.
- De Certeau, M. (2016). *La possession de Loudun*. Payot.
- Davies, D. (2002). *Death, Ritual and Belief*. Continuum.
- Délano, A., & Nienass, B. (2016). Introduction: Borders and the Politics of Mourning. *Social Research*, 83(2), XIX-XXXI. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2016.0028>
- Delaplace, G. (2024). *La voix des fantômes. Quand débordent les morts*. Seuil.

- Despret, V. (2015). *Au bonheur des morts*. La Découverte.
- Despret, V. (2023). *Les morts à l'œuvre*. La Découverte.
- Engelke, M. (2019). The Anthropology of Death Revisited. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 48, 29-44. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102218-011420>
- Godelier, M. (dir.) (2014). *La mort et ses au-delà*. CNRS éditions.
- Hertz, R. (1905-1906). Contribution à une étude sur la représentation collective de la mort. *L'Année sociologique*, 10, 48-137. <https://anthropomada.com/bibliotheque/HERTZ-Robert.pdf>
- Kanerva, K., & Koski, K. (2019). Beings of many kinds – introduction for the theme issue “undead”. *Thanatos*, 8(1), 1-28. <https://journal.fi/thanatos/issue/view/10527>
- Klugman, C. (2006). Dead men talking : Evidence of post death contact and continuing bonds. *Omega*, 53(3), 249-262. <https://doi.org/10.2190/40UP-PKC5-D4RV-E1QV>
- Kobelinsky, C., Furri, F., & Noûs, C. (2021). The place of the dead in the Mediterranean. A Sicilian experience. *Migration Letters*, 18(6), 711-719. <https://migrationletters.com/index.php/ml/article/view/1243/1290>
- Laqueur, T. (2018). *The work of the dead. A cultural history of mortal remains*. Princeton University Press.
- Maddrell, A. (2013). Living with the deceased: Absence, presence and absence-presence. *Cultural geographies*, 20(4), 501-522. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474013482806>
- Mathijssen, B. (2017) The ambiguity of human ashes: Exploring encounters with cremated remains in the Netherlands. *Death Studies*, 41(1), 34-41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2016.1257882>
- Mencej, M. (2021). The Dead, the war, and ethnic identity: Ghost narratives in post-war Srebrenica. *Folklore*, 132, 412-433. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.2021.1905380>
- Neimeyer, R. A. (2001). *Meaning reconstruction and the experience of loss*. American Psychological Association.
- Norlock, K. J. (2017). Real (and) imaginal relationships with the dead. *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 51, 341-356. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-016-9573-6>
- Palgi, P., & Abramovitch, H. (1984). Death: A cross-cultural perspective. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 13, 385-417. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2155675?origin=JSTOR-pdf>
- Pillonel, A., & Berthod, M.-A. (submitted). The comfort of standardisation in the face of funeral pluralism. The oldest-old individual organising funerals in a public funeral centre.
- Rothaupt, J., & Becker, K. (2007). A Literature review of Western bereavement theory: From deathecting to continuing bonds. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, 15(1), 6-15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480706294031>

- Saona, M. (2022). Carrying *L'Intrus*: The transport-station of an organ-transplant. *Psychoanalysis, culture and society*, 27, 546-562. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41282-022-00325-w>
- Varjakoski, H. (2019). Death, loved ones and relationality: Continuities and discontinuities. *Mortality*, 24(4), 418-430. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2018.1563056>
- Verdery, K. (1999). *The political lives of dead bodies. Reburial and postsocialist change*. Columbia University Press.

## **Povzetek**

Odnos med živimi in mrtvimi je bil predmet številnih raziskav, ki kažejo na raznovrstnost razvoja tega odnosa skozi čas in v različnih družbeno-kulturnih kontekstih. Naj gre za materialnost ostankov pokojnih ali za entitete, v katere so se sčasoma spremenili (kot so duhovi ali druge prikazni) – ti odnosi se razvijajo v različne smeri, odvisno od namena, ki ga zasledujejo živi. Ta članek obravnava tvornostno vlogo mrtvih, ki je osnova teh odnosov in spodbuja žive, da delujejo v eni ali drugi smeri. V ta namen najprej preuči, na kakšen način se pojem tvornosti uporablja v nekaterih teoretičnih in empiričnih pristopih. Nato nakazuje eksperimentalno slovnico odnosov med živimi in mrtvimi; slovnico, ki omogoča prepoznavanje in umeščanje bolj ali manj specializiranih posrednikov, ki učinkujejo na ta tvornostni del mrtvih.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** smrt, entitete, trupla, relacijska tvornost, antropologija

**CORRESPONDENCE:** Marc-Antoine Berthod, Faculty of Social Work Lausanne, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland (HES-SO), Chemin des Abeilles 14, 1010 Lausanne, Switzerland. E-mail: marc-antoine.berthod@hetsl.ch