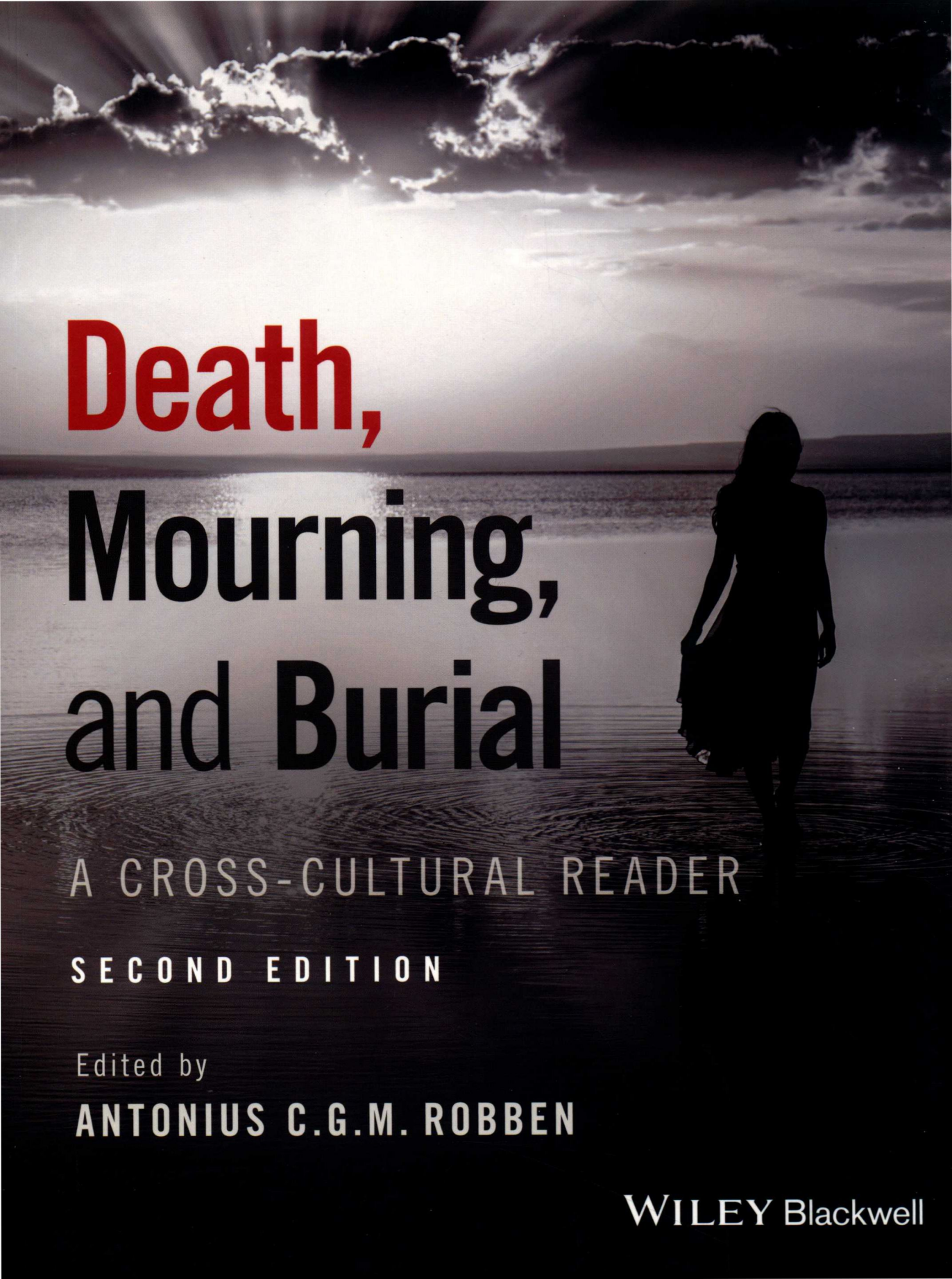

Death, Mourning, and Burial

A CROSS-CULTURAL READER

SECOND EDITION

Edited by
ANTONIUS C.G.M. ROBBEN

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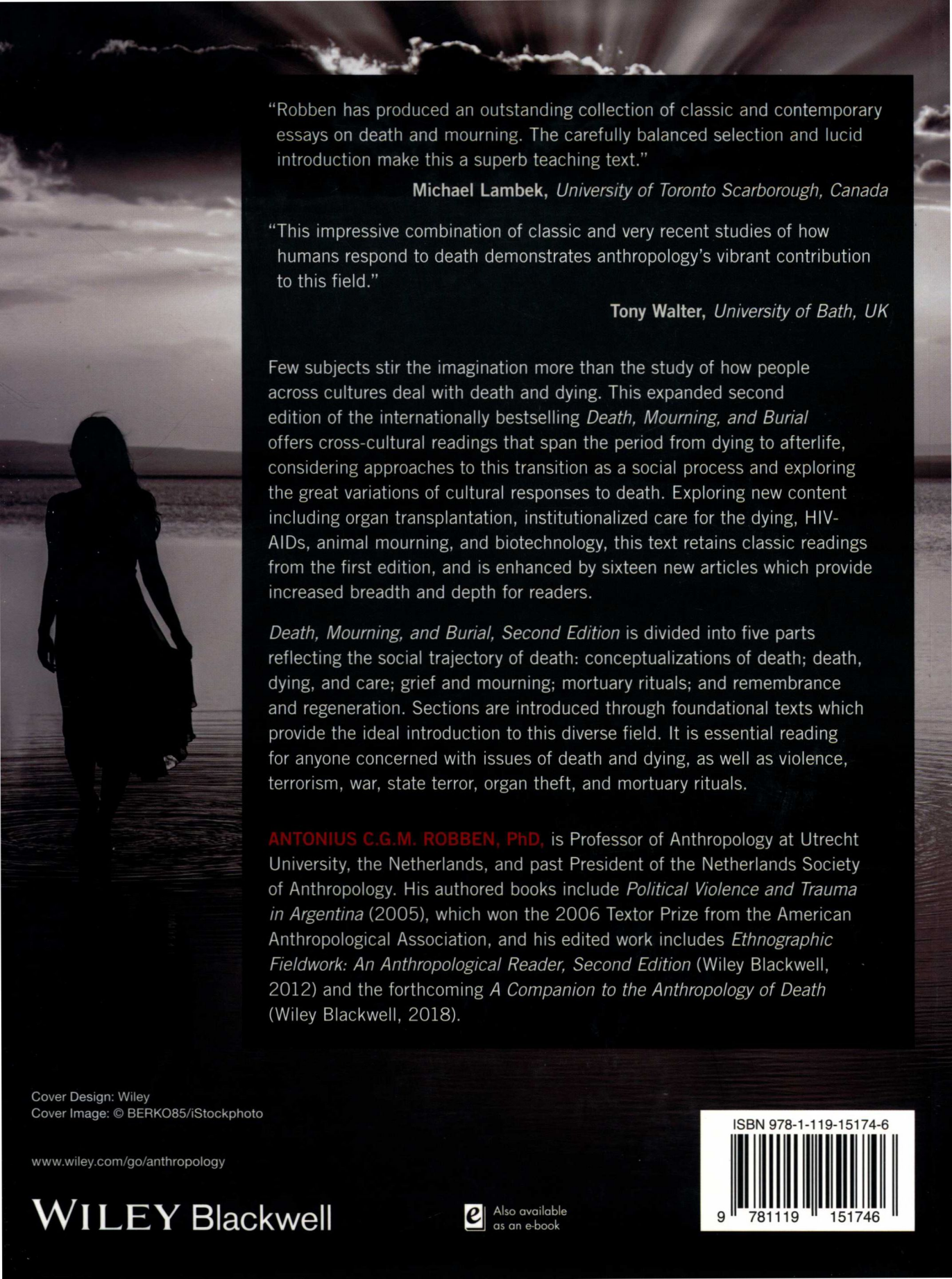

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ANTONIUS C.G.M. ROBBEN, PhD, is Professor of Anthropology at Utrecht University, the Netherlands, and past President of the Netherlands Society of Anthropology. His authored books include *Political Violence and Trauma in Argentina* (2005), which won the 2006 Textor Prize from the American Anthropological Association, and his edited work includes *Ethnographic Fieldwork: An Anthropological Reader, Second Edition* (Wiley Blackwell, 2012) and the forthcoming *A Companion to the Anthropology of Death* (Wiley Blackwell, 2018).

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Death, Mourning, and Burial

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Contents

Death and Anthropology: An Introduction

Antonius C. G. M. Robben

Every autumn, men and women in the United Kingdom wear red paper poppies to commemorate the British troops who died in World War I and later armed conflicts. Adopted in 1921, the modest symbol was inspired by the first two lines of a poem written in 1915 by John McCrea, a medical officer of the Canadian Expeditionary Force: "In Flanders fields the poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row" (McCrae 1919). The poppy was only one of many reminders in the decade after the carnage of the Great War. More than nine hundred British military cemeteries dotted the landscapes of Belgium and France in 1918 (Hurst 1929). A Tomb of the Unknown Warrior was placed in Westminster Abbey in 1920 to honor unidentified soldiers. There were hundreds of thousands of psychiatric casualties, and many families continued to mourn their dead loved ones. Spirit photographs were taken on Remembrance Day in 1922 that showed the ghosts of fallen soldiers, and artists grappled in the interwar years with the sense of it all (Eksteins 1989; Mosse 1990; Winter 1995).

In 2014, a remarkable bed of red poppies sprouted at the foot of the Tower of London. Two artists had created the installation *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* to mark the one-hundredth anniversary of the British entry into World War I. The field of 888,246 hand-made ceramic poppies represented the number of British fatalities.[1] I visited the display on a Saturday afternoon in October 2014, and saw thousands of people lining the ramparts that surround the grounds. I struck up a conversation with a middle-aged couple from Cheshire. They had made the journey to London to see the open-air installation, and pay tribute to the relatives who had sacrificed their lives in the Great War. The woman's grandfather had served as a young paramedic. He survived the war but never recovered from the mental shocks received across the Channel. Even though there was no one left in 2014 with a living memory of fighting the war, still nearly 4 million people came from all over Great Britain to see the display.[2] The annual commemorations, the works of art, and the personal mementos

Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader, Second Edition. Edited by Antonius C. G. M. Robben.

gave the century-old dead a presence in people's consciousness which meant deceased relatives and compatriots continued to be remembered.

One of the casualties of World War I was the French anthropologist Robert Hertz. He was stationed near Verdun and died on April 13, 1915, after volunteering for an offensive mission towards Marchéville-en-Woëvre across open terrain defended by German machine guns (Parkin 1996: 13). Hertz (1905–6) had written what has become the single most influential text in the anthropology of death, of which large portions are reproduced in this anthology. The elaborate death rituals of the Dayak in Kalimantan, Indonesia, may seem far removed from the hasty burial of massive numbers of dead in World War I and the collective prayers said for their souls at public war funerals (Capdevila and Voldman 2006). Yet, the two mortuary practices share a general concern for carrying out society's social and moral obligations to the dead, and show analogies in the representation and destiny of the lamented souls. Hertz writes that the soul's departure for the land of the dead after reburial is not necessarily permanent: "In certain Indonesian societies the appeased souls are actually worshipped, and they then settle near the domestic hearth in some consecrated object or in a statuette of the deceased which they animate: their presence, duly honoured, guarantees the prosperity of the living" (see Chapter 1). Are the paper and ceramic poppies not also imbued with the souls and memories of the dead, and does the playing of the "Last Post" in the Belgian town of Ypres – every day since 1928 – not only pay homage to the dead but remind us also of the tolls of war and the value of peace?

The anthropology of death has been struggling with the cultural diversity and structural similarity of mortuary rituals since the discipline's early days. Anthropologists and sociologists around the turn of the nineteenth century, such as Tylor (1930), Durkheim (1995), Hertz (1960), and Van Gennep (1960), compared funerary rituals and death cultures through their overarching evolutionary, functionalist, and structuralist approaches. This period ended when anthropologists like Malinowski (1954), Radcliffe-Brown (1933), Goody (1962), and Evans-Pritchard (1968) began to conduct long-term fieldwork. They revealed the varying collective responses to death, and showed that the Western understandings and scholarly interpretations of death and ritual differed significantly from those of other cultures. The analytical pendulum swung back towards more comparative approaches during the 1970s and 1980s in such works as Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson (1976), Huntington and Metcalf (1979), Bloch and Parry (1982), and Palgi and Abramovitch (1984). At the same time, anthropologists continued to conduct ethnographic fieldwork but their studies differed from the earlier ethnographies because of the influence of postmodern, reflexive and deconstructive approaches in American anthropology. Without trying to be exhaustive, the most important monographs are Badone (1989), Cátedra (1992), Clark-Decès (2005), Conklin (2001), Danforth (1982), Desjarlais (2003), Green (2008), Hinton (2005), Hockey (1990), Kan (1989), Klima (2002), Kwon (2006), Lock (2002), Nelson (2008), Parry (1994), Robben (2005), Rosaldo (1980), Sanford (2003), Scheper-Hughes (1992), Seremetakis (1991), Suzuki (2000), Verdery (1999), Vitebsky (1993), and Whitehead (2002). This rich ethnographic harvest from the 1990s and 2000s has been spurring renewed efforts to formulate more general models and comparative approaches to the study of death, as will be shown in Part I of this volume.

This cross-cultural reader combines foundational texts in the anthropology of death with enduring texts from the 1970s to the 1990s and recent works from the 2000s and 2010s. The latter texts have been selected because of their innovative contribution to the field by benefiting from insights developed in medical anthropology, the anthropology of violence and trauma, and memory studies. The Reader's first edition was organized along a trajectory from dying to afterlife (Robben 2004). This new edition pays closer attention to fields of interest in the anthropology of death that have the promise of opening future lines of research.

Conceptualizations of Death

At the turn of the nineteenth century, anthropologists were looking for universal features in the diverse cultural responses to death, particularly in funerary rituals and expressions of mourning. Later generations became absorbed in the mortuary practices themselves through meticulous ethnographies and sophisticated interpretations without trying to formulate the type of generalizing statements of their predecessors. Conceptualizing death, grief, and mourning was so daunting in the face of

the tremendous variation of funerary rituals that anthropologists shied away from general models and frameworks, with only few exceptions in the 1970s and 1980s as was mentioned above. In the early 1970s, Johannes Fabian (2004) bemoaned anthropology's parochialization, folklorization, and exoticization of death. An obsessive concern for cultural variation, the folkloric isolation of death as a self-contained experience, and a fascination with exotic mortuary practices inhibited the formulation of generalizations that transcended local peculiarities. This situation did not change in the following decades, but the need for general concepts and models was nevertheless felt as the ethnographies of death multiplied. In search of theoretical inspiration, anthropologists harked back to the work of Hertz and Van Gennep, often refreshing their models but only seldom engaging them critically. Some anthropologists, however, attempted to develop new concepts, models, and comparative frameworks. This section includes five comparative studies in the anthropology of death, namely two key articles by Hertz and Van Gennep from the 1900s, a text by Lifton and Olson from the 1970s, and two recent examples of comparative approaches by Hallam and Hockey, and Robben from the 2000s and 2010s.

The chapter by Robert Hertz, "A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death," was published originally in 1905–6, and endures as a key text in the anthropology of death because of its comparative appeal. Hertz argued forcefully that the death of a human being is not exclusively a biological reality or confined to the individual sorrow of the bereaved relatives, but that death evokes moral and social obligations expressed in culturally determined funeral practices. Although Hertz restricts his analysis largely to the mortuary practices of South Asian tribal societies, he reveals a structure of great cross-cultural significance. In the excerpts included in this Reader, Hertz isolates the key elements in the secondary burials among the Dayak of Kalimantan, Indonesia. He points out that the inert body, the deceased's soul, and the surviving relatives play changing roles during the time between death and secondary burial; a time that he subdivides into two periods. First, there is the intermediary period during which (a) the inert body is temporarily stored or buried, (b) the soul of the deceased remains near the corpse, and (c) the bereaved relatives are separated from society and enter into mourning. Clearly, death does not occur at one moment in time but is a drawn-out process. The dead person is still considered part of society, and his or her continued residence among the living obliges them to provide food, engage in conversation, and show respect as if he or she were still alive. In a similar way, the deceased's soul does not depart for the land of the dead but wanders in the vicinity of the corpse and frequents the places where the deceased used to dwell. The bereaved relatives fear the soul's wrath for past wrongdoing, and are prone to appease the soul through sacrifices, taboos, and mourning. Furthermore, their sadness and weakness experienced at the loss might contaminate others. These circumstances make the mourners stand apart from society. They cannot participate in its daily routines, and wear distinctive clothing and ornaments.

The second and final period begins when the body has disintegrated sufficiently, the soul has detached from the deceased, and the mourners have properly expressed their grief and carried out their social obligations. Hertz sums up this second period as follows: "The final ceremony has three objects: to give burial to the remains of the deceased, to ensure the soul peace and access to the land of the dead, and finally to free the living from the obligations of mourning" (see Chapter 1). In contrast to the temporary burial of the first period, the final burial is a collective affair through which the deceased joins the ancestors and the community bids him or her farewell. The surviving relatives can now end their mourning. They cleanse themselves ritually from the impurities of their extended proximity to death, change into new clothing, and reunite with the community.

Arnold van Gennep made an equally important contribution to the cross-cultural study of death by interpreting mortuary rituals as one among similar rites of passage: "The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another" (Van Gennep 1960: 2–3). These transitions, such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death, are life crises that become the subject of elaborate elevation rituals as a person rises from one status to the next. These rituals take place in what Durkheim (1995) has called sacred time, and what Turner (1967) has named liminal time. Van Gennep's book *The Rites of Passage* (1960) was originally published in 1909. The chapter included in this collection discusses funerals.

Mortuary transition or elevation rituals have three distinct phases. First, there is a relatively short preliminary phase characterized by a rite of separation that isolates the corpse and the mourners from society, and makes them wear special clothing and observe certain taboos. The rite of transition takes place during the second or liminal phase that marks the passage from the land of the living to the afterworld. This phase has the most elaborate rituals because the journey is considered long and the deceased may have to be equipped with food, clothing, weapons, protective amulets, means of transportation, and a guide to lead the way. Finally, there is the postliminal rite of incorporation to indicate both the passage of the soul to the world of the dead and the return of the mourners to the bosom of society. The human remains are buried in a cemetery, placed in a tree, cremated, or separated in any other way from their temporary stay. The bereaved relatives join for a meal, sing songs or celebrate the final passage of the deceased. The mourning has come to an end, the social order has been restored, and the flow of everyday life is picked up again.

Robert Jay Lifton and Eric Olson postulate the universal fear of death in the chapter "Symbolic Immortality" from their book *Living and Dying* (1974), and like Malinowski (Chapter 6), they consider the belief in immortality as its universal response. Lifton and Olson reconcile Freud's emphasis on the finality of biological death – and the human need to believe otherwise – with Jung's attention to people's search for meaning and immortality through religious symbolization. Lifton and Olson find this symbolic immortality in five modes of expression. Biological immortality consists of extending life through one's offspring, family name, tribe or nation. The creation of literature, art works, and knowledge leads to the author's creative immortality. Theological immortality refers to beliefs in resurrection, reincarnation, rebirth, and a spiritual life after death. Natural immortality makes people part of an eternal universe and the interminable cycles of nature. Finally, experiential immortality concerns altered states of consciousness such as ecstasy, enlightenment, drug-induced highs, and collective effervescence. The fear of death impels people to procure these modes of symbolic immortality to overcome their innate death anxiety, and live meaningful lives in the promise of continuity with others. Society reaps the good works of these personal quests but may also suffer its consequences when leaders pursue self-aggrandizing and megalomaniac projects through war, political repression, and economic exploitation. In the vein of Lifton and Olson, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has argued that people try to transcend the fear of death through culture and social organization. Culture is a defiant denial of death in the desire for meaning and immortality: "Without mortality, no history, no culture – no humanity" (Bauman 1992: 7).

Anthropology's long-term interest in mortuary rituals and spirituality has its counterpart in archaeology's study of material culture and funerary artifacts. Anthropology's relative neglect of the material dimension of death cultures has been remedied by Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey, who developed a conceptual framework for the anthropological study of the materiality of death and mourning. In the chapter "Remembering as Cultural Process," from their book *Death, Memory and Material Culture* (2001), they emphasize that material objects mediate people's memory of the dead, and give cultural meaning to death through multi-varied, polysemous materializations. Artifacts as diverse as monuments, clothes, photographs, bodily gestures, inscriptions, and texts influence memory because they are relational constructs produced through a mutual constitution of material objects and human beings (see Gell 1998; Ingold 2011; Knappett 2016). The multiple contemporary and historical meanings of artifacts, and the memories they evoke, are dependent on place, time, power, gender, and the body. Meanings vary whether the spatial setting is sacred or communal, public or collective, and domestic or intimate. Time also influences the relation of material culture and memory, and not just because of the passage of time. Annual commemorations with dignitaries, national flags, and memorial wreaths shape the memory of the dead in other temporal ways than periodic family visits to the cemetery or the daily recollection of a deceased loved one by glancing at his or her photo in the living room. Power and gender relations among the mourners, and between the dead and the bereaved, influence the meaning of material objects and the representations of the dead. Finally, the mediation of the relation between the dead and the living exists as much in material objects as in the body. Embodied and sensorial memories can take the shape of corporeal practices, such as forms of dress and bodily movements that are reminiscent of the deceased.

In my contribution to this section (Robben 2014), entitled "Massive Violent Death and Contested National Mourning in Post-Authoritarian Chile and Argentina," I adapt a constructivist model of social psychology about personal mourning to an anthropological analysis of national mourning. The significance of the dual process model of coping with bereavement over other psychological models of mourning exists in its equal attention to the primary loss of a loved one experienced by the bereaved, and the secondary loss of restoring a shattered life. The model interprets personal mourning as a process of oscillation between the reality of confronting the death and grieving over the painful loss (loss orientation), and facing the reality of a life without the deceased (restoration orientation) by for instance being forced to sell a home that has become too expensive to maintain. The first loss is more directed towards the past, while the second loss is more future-oriented. I have applied this psychological model to the multiple oscillations in the national mourning of mass assassinations and disappearances in Chile and Argentina, but this framework can just as well be used to understand the dual mourning of families, social groups, and communities.

Chile and Argentina were suffering from dictatorial regimes in the 1970s and 1980s that disappeared and assassinated tens of thousands of citizens suspected of revolutionary ideas and armed actions. The national mourning of these losses differed in the two countries because of a distinct politics of oscillation that was propelled by national governments in competition with conflicting social groups. Chile was more oriented towards rebuilding the postconflict society through reparative justice, the memorialization of the repressive past, and concerted attempts to achieve national reconciliation. It confined the primary loss orientation to documenting the truth about state terrorism, and providing psychological and social assistance to the bereaved. Argentina's oscillation weighed more heavily on the side of loss orientation by prosecuting perpetrators, exhuming mass graves, and actively remembering the disappeared with street protests, while the country's restoration orientation remained limited to the failed amnesty of convicted perpetrators and halfhearted reparation measures. This dual process approach demonstrates that the conceptualization of death should always take the conceptualization of life after death into account because of their mutual influence.

Death, Dying, and Care

The inevitability of biological death made the German physician and psychologist Wilhelm Wundt assume that people are dominated by a universal fear of death. Bronislaw Malinowski (1954) challenged this idea in his 1925 essay "Magic, Science and Religion." He indicates that this universal fear is complemented by an equally universal denial of death through a belief in immortality. These two attitudes translate into an ambivalent attachment of the living and the dead. Surviving relatives want to break and at the same time prolong their association with the deceased. Close relatives accompany the loved one during the dying process, care for the corpse, assume the social status of mourners, and display their grief in public. Mortuary rituals separate the living from the dead. The corpse is removed from the place of death and undergoes some sort of transformation through burial, mummification, cremation or consumption, thus betraying the ambivalent relation between the living and the dead. The mourners are concerned about the dangers of the corpse and the contamination by death, but there reigns also a sublime sense of spirituality, hope, and otherworldliness. Malinowski considers such religious imagination as a functional response to death because people loathe the idea of a final ending. They cling to a belief in a spiritual life after death by imagining the salvation of an eternal spirit from the visibly decaying corpse. Thus, religion gives people a comforting sense of immortality, while the mortuary practices restore the group that has been temporarily disturbed by the death of one of its members.

Evans-Pritchard's study *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1968) provides a classic analysis of the cultural scenarios set in motion to deal with the disruptive consequences of a death caused by witchcraft. He notices that the Azande of southern Sudan distinguished between natural and magical causes of death. Snake bites, a collapsing granary or the wound of a spear were recognized as natural causes of death. However, these natural causes did not stand on their own but were related to secondary causes, usually witchcraft. Witchcraft made the victim cross the snake's path, so both the witch and the snake killed the person. What happened when a person's death was attributed to witchcraft? First, the bereaved relatives consulted a poison oracle (*benge*) to establish the cause of death. A noble