



# When parents die: Bereavement, decision-making and achieving adult personhood in rural Togo

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**Abstract** Death has received considerable attention in the social sciences when it comes to rites of passage, for example, funerals, cremations, vigils, or memorial services. As elders pass away, the generations shift, and former youths become elders themselves. This paper presents the case of my host father, a local notable in northern Togo, who died in 2018 and was honoured by an extensive mourning ritual the following year. Drawing on intense and active participant observation, I show the challenges my host sibling group faced in achieving social adulthood. Through daily decision-making processes, this group of grown sons and daughters shaped, manipulated and reorganised the configuration of rituals, addressing issues of succession, conflicts between animist and Christian rites, and whether to classify cattle gifts as ancestral honours or delayed bridal gifts. Making such decisions at the end of elders' lives is a crucial process for the rising generation to achieve adult social status.

**Keywords** Adulthood · Personhood · Kinship · Memorial service · Bride-wealth

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## **Wenn die Eltern sterben: Trauer, Entscheidungsfindung und Herausbildung einer Erwachsenenpersönlichkeit im ländlichen Togo**

**Zusammenfassung** In den Sozialwissenschaften wurden Tod und Sterben vor allem im Kontext von Übergangsriten thematisiert, wie sie in Beerdigungen, Einäscherungen, Mahnwachen oder Gedenkfeiern stattfinden. Mit dem Tod der Älteren verschieben sich die Generationen, und die Jüngeren werden selbst zu Älteren. In diesem Beitrag gehe ich auf das Ableben meines Gastvaters ein, der eine lokal bedeutende Person im Norden Togos war und im Jahr 2018 verstarb. Im darauffolgenden Jahr wurde er, wie in diesem Kontext üblich, mit einem umfangreichen Trauerritual geehrt. Anhand intensiver und aktiver teilnehmender Beobachtung zeige ich die Herausforderungen, mit denen sich meine Gastgeschwister konfrontiert sahen, um sich nach dem Ableben des Vaters prozesshaft den sozialen Status des Erwachsenseins erarbeiten zu können. Durch tägliche Entscheidungsfindungsprozesse formten, manipulierten und reorganisierten die erwachsenen Söhne und Töchter die erforderlichen Rituale. Sie setzten sich dabei mit Fragen der Erbfolge auseinander, navigierten Konflikte zwischen animistischen und christlichen Riten und trafen Entscheidungen zur Deutung von Rindern als Geschenk zur Ahnenehrung oder als verspätete Brautgabe. In diesem Artikel vertrete ich das Argument, dass ebensolche Entscheidungsfindungen am Ende des Lebens der Älteren ein wichtiger Prozess für die heranwachsende Generation sind, um den sozialen Status von erwachsenem Sein zu erreichen.

**Schlüsselwörter** Erwachsensein · Persönlichkeit · Verwandtschaft · Totenzeremonie · Brautgabe

## **Quand les parents meurent: le deuil, la prise de décision et l'accession à l'âge adulte dans les zones rurales du Togo**

**Résumé** La mort a fait l'objet d'une attention considérable dans les sciences sociales en ce qui concerne les rites de passage, par exemple, les funérailles, les crémations, les veillées ou les services commémoratifs. Avec le décès des aînés, les générations changent et les anciens jeunes deviennent eux-mêmes des aînés. Cet article présente le cas de mon père d'accueil, un notable local du nord du Togo, qui est décédé en 2018 et a été honoré par un rituel de deuil approfondi l'année suivante. En m'appuyant sur une observation intense et active des participants, je montre les défis auxquels mon groupe de frères et sœurs d'accueil a été confronté pour atteindre l'âge adulte social. Par le biais de processus décisionnels quotidiens, ce groupe de fils et de filles adultes a façonné, manipulé et réorganisé la configuration des rituels, abordant les questions de succession, les conflits entre les rites animistes et chrétiens, et la question de savoir s'il fallait classer les dons de bétail comme des honneurs ancestraux ou comme des cadeaux de mariage retardés. La prise d'une telle décision à la fin de la vie des aînés est un processus crucial pour que la génération montante atteigne le statut social d'adulte.

**Mots-clés** Adulte · Personnalité · Parenté · Service commémoratif · Richesse de la mariée

One Thursday in February at noon, Simkoma Mahessi (\*1942)<sup>1</sup>, my long-time host father in Togo, was bitten by a snake on the hillside behind his home, in a place where he liked to sit by some rocks. A snakebite healer treated him in the village the same day and he received antivenom at the district hospital the next. There, the local Catholic catechist, David, baptised him, with his consent. His condition fluctuated over the weekend, and on Monday his son, Pakpedong, called me in Germany with no idea what to do. On Tuesday, they took him to a bigger hospital in the regional capital. I sent 300€ for blood transfusions and Pakpedong travelled 70 km for special food. His condition improved in the morning; deteriorated again in the afternoon. Once, we spoke by phone.

A week after being bitten, Simkoma fell into a coma. He had been saying that his ancestors were calling him and he wanted to go home to die. His sons Pakpedong (\*1980), Pakilinam (\*1982) and one of his daughters-in-law had been with him; two more sons, Kodjo (\*1972) and M'Fa (\*1978), came from the south to help. After many urgent international calls, we decided to try every possible treatment. At one point, when Simkoma could not breathe, Pakpedong called me, screaming that his father was gone, but by the weekend, he could again breathe on his own and started to yawn. On Monday, he ached and had developed bedsores. He seemed to be trying to speak, but no one could understand. His eyes were closed, and he couldn't swallow. He passed on Tuesday night.

Simkoma's son Assérédema (\*1976), who had been blamed for a previous illness of his father, immediately confessed when his oldest half-brother Kodjo claimed that his malice had caused the snake to be there. He then hid, fearing violence from his accuser.

We decided to leave Simkoma's body at the hospital while the brothers made funeral arrangements. Early in the morning on 24 February, Toungba (\*1973), Kodjo, Pakpedong and Pakilinam took it from the morgue to the village of Upper Asséré. Because he had been baptised, a viewing and service were held in the church. Then he was buried outside his homestead, where the path to the village met the one from the house where he had been born. I paid for the coffin and Pakpedong for the cement slab over the grave. As is usual in this local context, it is the adult children of the deceased elder who are in charge—and not the wife/wives.<sup>2</sup>

The night before Simkoma died, I had still been debating whether to travel to Togo. My department chair advised me to go but my family in Germany also needed me. My host family accepted that I could not come: they felt that I had already supported them enough. I also worried that the overwhelmed brothers had been depending too heavily on my decisions and I did not want to spend more money. In

<sup>1</sup> I use names, nicknames or pseudonyms as requested by each protagonist. Birth dates are estimated based on the differences between individuals' ages.

<sup>2</sup> Simkoma's only wife present (out of four, one predeceased him in 2008, the other two were not present) was later involved in elaborate widowhood rituals, but no further mention is made in this article.

the end, I decided not to go right away but wait until the memorial ceremonies that take place there each January and February.

My host brothers reported that several hundred people had attended the funeral service. Pakpedong was happy with David, who he said had “*mis toute la famille dans la mains [taken the whole family in his hands]*”. They displayed a photo I had taken of Simkoma with my daughter. People all over the village sent food and millet beer. The local dignitaries ate in my courtyard, the close kin in Simkoma’s homestead, and everyone else outside under a big tree. Only Assérédema was missing.

I was devastated. During the treatments, Pakpedong, his brothers and I had talked and wept together on the phone at least twice a day. Acquaintances from throughout Togo had helped Pakpedong by talking to the doctors, advancing money and receiving my transfers from abroad. My former field assistant and colleague had helped David to organise the service from afar, as had his sister from Lomé, who had suggested waiting to bury Simkoma so that more people could come.

I cried a lot on Saturday, knowing that the funeral was taking place. I could not imagine how it would be to return and not see Simkoma. I would have to become an adult, or a different anthropologist, and perhaps to face the awkward contradictions between the two.

## 1 How parent’s deaths make children become adults

When elders die, their places as decision-makers and caregivers for the young become vacant. The deceased thus exchange social and economic positions with the survivors, with people who once cared for others now receiving care from their descendants who contribute tangible and intangible resources to bury their bodies and honour their spirits. In a country like Togo, little or no palliative or supportive care system available for the rural population in old age, so geriatric care is often only needed for a short period: unlike in the Global North, long periods of care before dying are rare. In this sense, I understand the care and honouring of the deceased body as a progressive but irreversible process of becoming first frail and then an ancestor. The act of burial inverts the “irreducible asymmetry” between parents and children (Strathern 2011, p. 246, 266), as the hierarchy of acting out decisions over frail, old and eventually dead bodies passes from parents to their adult children. This transition from life to death weighs heavily on the bereaved, as individuals and a group, and in material, emotional and cognitive ways. The process of organising care for the dead—preparing the body, choosing a coffin and determining the funeral’s ritual framework, chronological sequence and guest list—is highly charged normatively, bound to cultural ideas, and limited by weather conditions and the descendants’ monetary resources. Funerals are sites of prestige here, just as Lipset and Silverman describe in Melanesia:

“The funeral creates moral solidarity and largely speaks with one authoritative voice in support of what Ortner and Whitehead (1981) once termed the “prestige structure” of society. [...] Particularly in societies, as in Melanesia, where exchange is central both to mortuary ritual and to what Fortes called the attain-

ment of the status of “full personhood” (1987, p. 257), death rites do not so much as uphold ideology as provide a public arena for actors—again, usually men—to compete for prestige (e.g., Lincoln 1989; see also Goldschmidt 1973; Volkman 1985; Kan 1989)” (Silverman and Lipset 2016, p. 6).

Similarly, Durham and Klaitz (2002) describe funerals as key places where civility must be maintained and the potential social impacts of emotions like grief carefully constrained, but also where different forms of community and difference are shaped through awareness and management of the mutuality of emotion. They might also describe them as characterised by a sort of moral solidarity linked less to prestige than to recognising ways in which people can embarrass one another. Grieving may take time, is carried out differently by different individuals, and may thus impact family functioning (Abeles et al. 2004). With an integrative perspective on bereavement, Bonanno & Kaltman focus on “the role of contextual factors, (...) subjective meaning, changing representations of the lost relationship, and the regulation of coping and emotion” (1999, p. 771). Such interactive features of the grieving process can be facilitated through ritualisation and maintaining order, social cohesion and permanence of structure. In this way, ritual enables spheres of interaction in the group process, cognitive regulation and coping (Hobson et al. 2018). In line with this integrative approach, I focus on processes of negotiation and change during the social events surrounding the death and burial—or the commemoration of the death—of an elder:

“To be sure, the crisis into which the moral community must succumb at the death of one of its members provokes impassioned expressions of grief. But the tears, dirges, chants, and oratory are plural-contradictory and disputed. Here, we adopt a Bakhtinian concept of ‘dialogue’ among both official and unofficial voices into an egalitarian framework in which no single voice holds sway (Bakhtin 1984, p. 18). Mortuary rites do not necessarily move forward to synthesis or resolution. No chaos, psychological or social, is necessarily soothed. Rather, the ritual performances of personhood and moral community—we hesitate to label the ritual a ‘restoration’—remain ‘unfinalized,’ which is to say, open ended, amid a globalized polyphony (Bakhtin 1984, p. 53). Death provokes arguments, quarrels, and juxtapositions, but no last word” (Silverman and Lipset 2016, p. 7).

These “arguments, quarrels, and juxtapositions” are existential challenges for the bereaved. Dealing with a socially close person’s death is an inescapable challenge. The decision-making necessitated by elders’ deaths is thus a special process for the following generation and shapes the transition between life and death. In it, the social status of adulthood can develop in a particular way. When faced with an existential life event, social adulthood is what allows bereavement to be person-building for both the dead and those who bury them.

This challenge is unpredictable: few people choose the exact time of their own or others’ deaths or know exactly when their parents will die. Everyone knows that dying and death are universal, but they do not seem predictable and thus remain a shock. Every society probably has social, culturally shaped normative scripts for

dealing with the end of life, but individuals must still enact them in various material and emotional situations and in various social roles, and at various ages. This positionality influences both the need and ability for adult action. Bereavement is, such as parenthood, not a single event but a process that turns people into adults (Johnson-Hanks 2002, p. 871). Adults are confronted with obligations to others. Whether and how they meet them is part of a decision-making process with no predetermined end, which itself connects people when they accept or reject responsibility. Multiple (care) commitments within a bundle of relationships make people adults and shaping those very commitments is adult action. The adult human being is autonomous and in relatedness to others at the same time.

For Lambek (2021), norms provide orientation for action. He links them to an “ethical condition” at the decision-making level using the term “potentiality”. In all performative actions, “failing”—misconduct in the ethical and normative sense—is part of the “potentiality” of human action. Lambek also sees culpability—in the sense of conscious or intentional misconduct—as part of the “ethical condition”. This formulation implies that it is not possible to reach the social age of adulthood—or even to avoid it—in this special cultural setting, through witchcraft, illness, or even the death of one’s children. Other presumptions of “potentialities” might be framed in the Global North as ill-health outcomes, such as mental disorders, complications in the grieving process, or even an increased mortality risk of the bereaved (Stroebe et al. 2007). From the perspective of personhood, it might be achievable by acquiring certain characteristics, which can be stolen, lost or destroyed. However, the crucial point here is that adult action is what performs or erases characteristics of personhood.

The process offers further options, which in turn can have serious implications for the social futures of those close to them.

Following Durham (2017), two conditions must be met to achieve the social status of an adult: living a morally good life and being able to cope with economic challenges. These are both also important for taking adult action to deal with death and burial. They are interconnected, can fail and constitute adult “personhood” in action, as shown when Lambek reconnects virtue to action (Lambek 2015, p. 239, 256).

Acknowledging the challenge of being an adult means proving oneself in situations of varying complexity, such as getting out of embarrassing situations and distinguishing between what is considered mandatory, normative or permissible for a particular social position (Bude 2021). This takes account of the idea of achieving adulthood (Durham 2017; Solway 2017) at any time, not just in adolescence, and especially “dealing with discontinuities” (Bateson 1989). This socialisation process becomes visible through discontinuous decision-making processes that emerge repeatedly throughout the course of life. The death of one’s parents instantiates this challenge in a special way, and I see it as a crystallisation point in the life of a social person. A Fon proverb says that a man does not grow up until his father dies, whereas Fortes makes a similar case about the Tallensi:

“It concerns men primarily, since jural and ritual authority and responsibility are vested exclusively in them, but women are also directly affected by it.

Favoured by this Destiny, as Tallensi would put it, a man may have reached individual maturity with his children and even grandchildren around him. But if his own [...] father is still alive [...], he is still, strictly speaking, under paternal authority. It is only after his father's death that he gains the unencumbered jurial and ritual autonomy that marks truly complete personhood. Similar norms apply to women in relation to their own mothers" (Fortes 1987[1973], p. 265).

This means that "not the coming of age, the first self-earned money or one's own children, but only the death of one's parents [...] signifies the final end of childhood" (Grümmer and Roehl 2007, my translation), however old someone is at the time.

In this sense, I focus on a contradictory chain of events in which the public display of material wealth and the care taken to honour the deceased can lead to very specific decision-making. On the one hand, this reveals ethical challenges against which the living equally develop and experience social and cultural orientation. On the other, the values that honour the deceased persons also change, framing the (un)foreseen death and structuring possibilities of future action by the "survivors".

This paper describes the 2018 death of my host father Simkoma Mahessi, a locally respected elder in the village of Asséré in the Kabre area of northern Togo, whom I first met in 2006. As is customary, 1 year after his death he was honoured with extensive ceremonies in which I took the social role of a foster daughter, as I did from afar during his passing. I participated in this event and performed the required rituals with his sons and biological daughter. This very intense and active participant observation shows the multifaceted process of growing up and acting as an adult within the sibling group. Through the daily decisions we had to make, Simkoma's grown children framed, manipulated and reorganised the ritual events for his body and spirit, as well as the guests.

This paper is empirically based on this dense participation (Häberlein 2014) in social processes that took place during and after Simkoma's death: that is, from 2018 to especially February 2019. I documented the processes, conversations and discussions (whether on the phone, via WhatsApp or in person on site) during this time in extensive field notes, which form the data basis for this article. My involvement in the field—the Mahessi kinship group—is the explicit epistemological base of my analysis.<sup>3</sup> In presenting these data, a moral tension arises like that described by Lambek:

"In writing about the family, I too am stealing kinship insofar as I betray confidences. The anthropologist is no less a trickster than the younger sibling, out

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<sup>3</sup> I first came to the village of Asséré in 2006 to do research for my PhD. In the years that followed, I spent many months in the village, first alone, then with my first-born daughter. I lived on Simkoma's farm for a year until he finally gave me a piece of land where I built my own house, very close to him and his sons. Since then, I have been considered a family member to be consulted in critical family situations, whose children are blessed at the family fetish tree and who is also asked for financial support in family emergencies. By involving myself (and parts of my family back home in Germany) in ritual processes for our health and well-being, I have also become a resource in the widespread network of the Mahessi kin group. Indeed, this kind of care has a reciprocal character of immersion in our lives here and there. This involvement evokes my own emotions and is also the basis of my scientific reflection and analysis of social relations (Häberlein 2014, 2016, 2020).

here to steal not the birth right but the right to speak. Kinship and ethnography have this in common—that the intimacy on which they are based inevitably provokes betrayal and, thus, at least retrospectively, a sense of deception. This betrayal is doubled when the ethnography presented is about the intimacy of kinship itself’ (Lambek 2011, p. 6).

That said, I still intend to carry out this intimate ethnographic process with as much respect as possible towards all participants, and as an instrument of knowledge and interpretation of my topic. Through the chain of events—snakebite, hospitalisation, death, returning the body to the village, the funeral in 2018, and the preparation and implementation of the memorial ceremonies in 2019—I will show the particularly intensive internal and external negotiations and decision-making processes of the sibling group. These were externally oriented to a broader public and concerned both succession and the normative and actual incompatibility of animistic and Christian rituals. They were also internally oriented to re-structure the kin group by interpreting offerings of cattle as funerary sacrifices, when made by Simkoma’s sons, and as delayed bridal gifts, when made by his daughters and sons-in-law. All those negotiations had two purposes in common: showing adult action and dealing with potential conflict. Avoiding conflicts about one issue could provoke intractable conflict regarding the other. More generally, all these actions shaped processes related to social change and gender through the situational actions of adults.

## 2 The challenge of honouring Simkoma after his death

Simkoma had held several prominent positions in his life: he served as local chairman of Togo’s governing political party, Union pour la République, and an agricultural development co-operative and was a respected local mediator, a fetishist, and (ironically) a snakebite healer. Each of these roles was tied to a specific network of relationships, and he would have liked to pass all of them on to his sons. However, the sons ignored or strayed from his wishes and have so far taken up almost none of the responsibilities that Simkoma (as a local “big man”) had accumulated over the course of his life. One of the greatest challenges for his children was to bring his life to a dignified close before a large public community. As a sibling group we wanted to honour our deceased father and fulfil any other expectations of his descendants, despite our unwillingness to accept all his communal responsibilities.

Simkoma loved to express his many relationships with material gifts. He saved very little money, reinvesting what he received in social relationships: as Guyer (1995) puts it, he invested his “wealth in people”. When he was admitted to the hospital, his sons found that he had only FCFA 40,000 (about 60€) to pay for his medical expenses. A year later, it was up to the sibling group to fund the funeral and mourning ceremonies.

Making the economic and social inclusiveness of people visible is in itself an important aim of West African funeral ceremonies. As Strathern paraphrases Goody (1962),



“West African mortuary institutions were concerned with the reallocation of rights and duties, after death, precisely insofar as a social person was defined through the mutual expectations that constituted his or her relationships” (Strathern 2020, p. 10).

The costs and efforts this network of relationships bears, which the adult children have to organise and manage, elude a capitalist moral economy: Elwert describes this extraordinary sphere, which cannot be re-transformed in Bohannan’s sense:

“The destruction of goods by burning or burial as part of the funeral ritual confers prestige on the deceased (and his or her descendants hosting the feast) and withdraws these goods from the economy. Life, or rather production and exchange in the course of a life, are thus doubled by an extra-economic finality at the last moment: the acquisition of prestige at the end of life” (Elwert 1991, p. 173, my translation).

In the case of the 2019 death ceremonies, this specifically meant referring to criteria such as volume, demonstrating wealth, mobilisation of people, and solidarity (Elwert 1991; for similar criteria in Indian regions see De Maaker 2012) to honour Simkoma. Volume was provided by a DJ at the homestead from early evening until nearly dawn for a week and a Catholic mass with a choir. The bereaved families of the kinship group demonstrated wealth by publicly sacrificing animals: the sons and I each offered a cow and the other relatives sheep and roosters during the ceremony. We mobilised many people for both the funeral and the subsequent ceremonies, not only from neighbouring villages but from southern Togo. Christian and animist families in the village showed solidarity by contributing ingredients for rice and sauces and preparing food and millet beer for the celebration. All the women who could gathered to cook or serve food. None of the local politicians attended, even those who had been Simkoma’s personal associates, but they lent us a hundred chairs from the local party headquarters.

We also had to manage the concurrent Christian and animist rituals. Here, the main conflict was between the lay catechist David and Simkoma’s mother’s brothers.<sup>4</sup> I was surprised that the siblings immediately agreed to combine Catholic rites—blessing the cattle with holy water and a communion service—with the those offered at various ancestral and fetish places and did not question David’s baptism of their father shortly before his death or the consequent need to perform Christian rituals. But there was no question about also performing an animistic death ceremony: the problem was how to combine two reference systems with mutually exclusive norms and deliberately look the other way without arousing the respective actors’ doubts.

David came Saturday morning. After we ate in my courtyard and discussed his work, he blessed the cattle, sternly admonished us that they now belonged exclusively to God, and departed. In the evening, he returned with altar boys and a choir and held a communion service. I was sleepy and had forgotten to bring

<sup>4</sup> On the important social position of the mother’s brother, see Radcliffe-Brown (1924), Goody (1959) and Bloch and Sperber (2002) and, for the Kabre region specifically, Piot (1996).

money for the collection, so Pakpedong and Toungba helped me out. Afterwards, we paid the choir and served everyone food in my courtyard. On Sunday morning, we all went to greet a stick dressed in Simkoma's clothing that represented his body and lay in the death hut next to his grieving widow. David and the choir came back to thank us but tactfully left before the second cow was slaughtered or the mother's brothers arrived.

David had been trying to convert Simkoma for many years, and I interpret the latter's deathbed baptism as his final political act to resolve a long-standing religious division in the village. Since I had periodically interacted with David for years and had far more experience with Christianity than my host brothers, I had to deal with David, the choir and the Christian mourners. The catechist kept reminding me that Simkoma was now called Paul and that the cattle now belonged to God and were no longer available for animistic rituals. My brothers kept straight faces, crossed themselves when the catechist and altar boys did, and otherwise kept quiet. I met with David in my own courtyard, where he would not see what happened in Simkoma's. Coordinating the timing so that all the competing actors entered and exited like actors in a play and did not interfere with each other's different reference systems was possible only because all the siblings cooperated, but David also helped by leaving quickly when Simkoma's maternal uncles arrived: he, too, was apparently strategically avoiding conflict. I also interpret this decision-making horizon—actively choosing not to name contradictions but to let them co-exist—as intentional passive adult action in the sense of embedded agency.

All these facets of honouring the dead result from decisions made within the sibling group according to their economic resources and personal possibilities and limited by the will to perform the ritual in that particular way. These situational decisions, made individually and as a group, have consequences that unfold both in the present and in the future.

In his article "Kinship as gift and theft", Lambek (2011) considers prepared, unwanted or fraudulent succession by adult children. I follow him in characterising the actions that are condensed in this time of public rites as ethically relevant and marking for a future orientation of the acting actors:

"[Those acts] are ethical in the sense not that they are inevitably good or just but that they entail criteria for judgment as well as acceptance or acknowledgment by actors of their commitment to their acts and consequences. They occur in reference to past and future as well as the sheer present and are not easily undone. Acknowledgment and commitment are reinforced by the fact that, frequently, participants include not only the principals and those acted on but also those granted the authority to officiate and those who serve as witnesses. Such public acts are highly marked; they assert themselves as consequential, and they serve to place persons within long-term and possibly permanent relationships or to transform the nature of those relationships. They do so by establishing and acknowledging the criteria for engaging in and evaluating subsequent practice. In sum, relations and practice are produced or transformed by means of acts as much as acts presuppose and emerge out of a structure of relations and a stream of practice" (Lambek 2011, p. 3–4).

My further analysis of social events, especially within the sibling group, starts with the premise that “relations and practice” are linked to actions and negotiations. I am primarily concerned with the ethical norms around the individual desire or ability and social expectation to grow up (or not), which I connect with the “potentiality” for personal, economic or social failure (see also Lambek 2015, p. 246, 265). Furthermore, becoming socially adult is itself an ethical undertaking or question, carried out through autonomous performative action and testimony by relational reconfiguration. These processes are existential and carry risks.

### 3 The Sibling Group: Social re-organization, decision-making and postponed succession

When I travelled to Togo for Simkoma’s death ceremonies, I was unsure how his children would receive me. Would they think I was just an interesting curiosity to their father, one of the many and varied social contacts he had enjoyed? What social role would they ascribe to me with him gone? Would I still be a member of the family, becoming a sibling instead of daughter, or would I revert to a visitor? I was not the only one with doubts. Someone told me that rumour had it I would probably never return, now that Simkoma had died. This was not how it turned out.

Pakpedong met me at the bus station in the city. That day, we bought rice, oil, tomato paste and spices and took a taxi towards Asséré, more than 30 km away. Meanwhile, he told me the latest news. All the siblings had arrived but one. (No one could reach M’Fa or knew if he was coming). Kodjo had not gone home since Simkoma’s death and he and his children were living in his father’s compound with Pakpedong, Pakilinam and their families. His estranged wife had come north to take the role of the first daughter-in-law at the ceremonies and Pakpedong said they might reconcile if he refrained from drinking heavily and physical abuse. Assérédema’s position remained unclear as he had confessed to witchcraft, but at least he was back at his homestead in Lower Asséré. Simkoma’s only biological daughter, Aninam, had also come from the south. Like me, she had come without her children or husband, but also against his will: he did not want to bring a bride gift. Pakpedong said that with me there we were almost ready for our father’s ceremonies, thus defining my social role as a sister within the sibling group. Our shared goal would be to conduct the ceremony properly, keep the brothers in line, and prevent, divert, or (ideally) resolve conflicts. We did not always succeed, but we tried our best.

Each day, we met to discuss how to proceed and especially how to handle Kodjo and Assérédema: one was dealing with alcoholism and its consequences and the other with jealousy expressed through witchcraft and we feared that the situation could escalate. The plan included the following steps:

- Friday morning: Pakpedong, Kodjo and I would pick up two bulls from the Fulbe livestock farmers, who would bring them home with us. (Kodjo only agreed to that when I promised to pay for the help).
- Friday afternoon: The sibling group would sacrifice a rooster outside Simkoma’s room. Then, Pakpedong and some kids would pick up the chairs for the graveside service.

- Saturday morning: The extended family would go to the fetishist in Lower Asséré and ask for insight into Simkoma's death.
- Sunday noon: Non-family guests would arrive and we would serve food to them all: the local dignitaries (like the district chiefs and David) in my courtyard and the others in Simkoma's courtyard. David would lead a communion service and the Christians would leave before the Soo (death dance) began.
- Sunday afternoon: We would take the symbolic body from the death hut to his birth homestead; then to Toungba's, Kodjo's and my own courtyards; then to the village square; then to Simkoma's courtyard; and finally to the traditional grave of the kin group for burial. Each step would be accompanied by dancing, singing and drumming.
- Sunday night: Everyone would return to Simkoma's courtyard with the DJ.

“Let's see if it all works out,” I wrote in my fieldnotes. “Toungba and Pakilinam will work in Simkoma's yard, Pakpedong and I in mine. Kodjo will sit with the fetishists—he might drink too much and start a fight. Assérédema? I have no idea where he is, I'll have to ask. M'Fa is also still missing.”

On Friday morning, we collected the cows as planned. Kodjo and Pakpedong walked with the younger Fulbe but I came by motorbike so I could get back early and arrange for them to be fed. We paid the older Fulbe, who had also come by motorbike, and later I gave them some liquor and extra money for bringing the cows up the mountain. Kodjo accused me of overpaying and Toungba apologised to me for the extra cost, but I remained calm: at least the cows had behaved. Pakpedong rushed down to the party headquarters and came back up the mountain with the kids, one hundred chairs, and three tables.

A division of labour emerged among the siblings. Pakpedong was the manager and everyone consulted him. He asked Toungba for advice when he needed it, but Kodjo just followed their instructions. As the firstborn, he had to chop down the cactus at Simkoma's fetish place and kill the sibling's expiatory chicken. That was a success: the chicken fluttered enough to make clear that the ancestors had accepted our gift.

Pakpedong was over-burdened. He barely ate and was always running around. Toungba's older boys helped Pakilinam put up a palm-branch awning by Simkoma's grave. The women were brewing millet beer and everyone in Simkoma's yard was busy cooking.

Returning to the Fon proverb quoted earlier, “You're not really an adult until your parents have died”, I now explore the question of how, faced with their father's absence, siblings realign their relationships with each other and in the public, non-kinship, sphere. Losing one's parents also enables potential new freedoms. It becomes conceivable—maybe even necessary—to escape intergenerational entanglements. Grown children, orphaned, become adults who no longer must position themselves vis-à-vis their parents, justify themselves to them, or worry about their physical well-being; at least they can no longer deal with them personally. Thus, it is not only caring for others, like children or elders (Häberlein 2018), that makes a person grow up *by process*, but also not having to. On a social level, this also implies the transition to the “age of active wisdom” (Bateson 2011). Although all

this preparation may also be understood as a form of care for the dead, their legacies and their continued personhood, it also increasingly becomes a matter of choice and self-reliant negotiation by the living.

Coming to terms with parents as ancestors required care to be managed on yet another level. Until Simkoma could be fully positioned as an ancestor, it carried the risks inherent in a liminal phase of social vulnerability. What happened then would influence how the sibling group organised its coexistence in the future: who would stay, leave or perhaps even have to flee.

On Saturday at dawn, we went to the fetishist's house and found neither him nor Assérédema there. His son and Pakpedong went to look for him and found that he had told Assérédema that he would not be free until later that day and would charge twice his usual fee. We were all angry at Assérédema for not telling us and went to his homestead. (Toungba even brought a stick, but he left it outside). When we found him, he apologised and came along.

Finally, there were about 20 people sitting in the fetish hut and the fetishist himself was hidden behind a mat. He acted as a medium: first, his own tutelary spirit spoke, then Simkoma's mother and finally Simkoma himself. He said his death had involved witchcraft: his cousin and Assérédema had sent the snake to bite him. Three times, he asked Assérédema why he had hidden during the funeral and Assérédema replied that he had feared being killed. Then, Toungba suggested that I ask Simkoma to accept my husband's bride offering and he did. He then said that we would not see him again, but that he would still be there, released his widow Kossiwa from any further ritual obligations and concluded by asking us to forgive what had led to his death.

Simkoma's instructions through the medium meant that we now had clarity about how to proceed. Assérédema became less elusive, took on duties like overseeing the serving of millet beer and liquor, and reached an uneasy truce with Kodjo. Toungba's inspiration about the bridal gift meant that no one questioned my integration into the sibling group.

On Monday, the second day of the ceremony, I wrote in my field notes: "I still got more involved than usual. It feels normal. But it's strange without Simkoma. His picture hangs everywhere, his daughters-in-law wear his clothes. We siblings eat together in his room and discuss next steps at a feast where someone else is distributing the food. We must decide everything ourselves and it's tricky. We can't forget anyone and must feed everyone according to their status and within our means. The boys hand it out until nothing's left and I have to remind them to save some for their own families." We searched every nook and cranny in Simkoma's room and found letters from Pakpedong and me; relatives' birth certificates; prescriptions, pills and traditional medicine; unworn clothes; his hat and stick collections.

Now, the sibling group faced another challenge: inheritance. On Tuesday, we assessed Simkoma's estate with his mother's brothers and they found only 8000 FCFA<sup>5</sup>. Later, Pakpedong told me that Simkoma had given them 40,000 FCFA before being admitted to the hospital, which they had spent on his treatment. Pakpedong and Pakilinam had added another 5000 FCFA to the money that was left so that

<sup>5</sup> 1.00 € is 655.957 FCFA.

his uncles would find something. Everyone was allowed to choose something from Simkoma's estate. Each brother took 1000 FCFA and a hat; I asked for a robe that I had liked on him. Toungba also made sure to give me a 100-FCFA coin.

In the last 2 days, many people from the south had already gone home. At the southern relatives' request, we held a meeting to determine who would succeed Simkoma as head of the family in the village. My brothers all kept their heads down, leaving the question unresolved. Some relatives complained that they had not been invited to the cattle sacrifice, but this criticism was defused. We passed around the last seven cans of Fanta Orange, Simkoma's favourite drink, and parted peaceably.

Simkoma's death necessarily transformed sibling relationships and family responsibilities. It was no longer possible to seek his advice on how to conduct rituals, distribute resources and mediate between family members; when to schedule travel, sowing and harvesting; or where the younger ones should study and work. We can see these events as a "vital conjuncture" (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 2016, Alber 2016, 2023; Evans 2014) that the ritual process of the funeral and death ceremonies structured on a normative level, marking the beginning and end of the phase of adjusting everyone's roles. In the age-class-organised society of the Kabre, there is indeed a socially grounded normative script—which, however, unlike in other local cultural settings, is comparatively more negotiable in its freedom to organise, arrange and improvise the necessary things (Häberlein 2016). Actions at vital conjunctures are oriented towards the future, but how does this actually affect or involve the interconnected group of people, like the sibling group here? Decision-making marks having the competence and capacity for "relational adulthood" (Settersten 2009),<sup>6</sup> but it also brings the expectation of responsibility.

After Simkoma's death ceremonies, several people proposed appointing a new head of the family. The relatives from the south were especially concerned: they felt that they needed someone in their village of origin to mediate conflicts, make decisions, organise initiations and perform rituals at the family fetish tree. On Thursday, I took a photo of the extended family, my first since 2007. Kodjo now sitting in Simkoma's place. This extended family meeting (which only included men) adjourned without choosing a successor. A follow-up meeting was scheduled, but the relatives from the south left before it took place—we had just waited until they realised that there was no solution to their problem.

In fact, there was no good choice. Kodjo, as eldest, had hinted that he was interested and he would happily perform rituals on request, but his drinking made him pick fights and his demands for payment disgusted Toungba and Pakpedong, who thought that those remaining in the village of origin had a duty to perform rituals for the entire kinship group. Meanwhile, Toungba was happy to help to solve problems but preferred discreet conversations behind the scenes to appearing in public. Pakpedong diplomatically managed his father's external contacts but avoided forming relations of dependency (with party members, for example). The remaining

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Settersten's (2009, p. 78) argument for relational ties refers to Elder's "linked lives" (1994) rather than to social-anthropological notions of "relatedness" of *new-kinship studies*. Thus, life-course research is not so much linked to kinship studies in social anthropology.

brothers were not even candidates: Pakilinam was too young and busy with farming, Assérédema's confession of witchcraft had disqualified him, and M'Fa simply wasn't there.

The sibling group was in no hurry and Toungba, Pakpedong and I stressed that our top priority until after the ceremonies was to prevent public conflicts, fights or hostile words, thus honouring Simkoma as a man of peace. Here, mainly Toungba and Pakpedong tacitly tried to determine the family fortunes. Lambek sees the question of succession as bound up in the events surrounding the death of the parent:

“Succession is confirmed not at the birth of the child but around the death of the parent. Indeed, the ostensibly natural facts of birth order and chronological seniority are eventually superseded. The natural ‘facts’ are never sufficient for kinship but always subordinated to social ‘acts’. Even normative practices can be overturned by contingent acts [...]. If expansive families like the ones that incorporate fieldworkers speak to the gift of and for kinship, sibling rivalry and impartible inheritance demonstrate the theft of kinship. The paring down of kinship is especially salient in families destined for leadership” (Lambek 2011, p. 5).

At this point, I would like to add a distinction between inheritance and succession. As Guyer (1995) argues, “wealth of people” cannot just be transferred but must be acquired personally. Lambek's argument resembles Guyer's “wealth of spirits”, although for good reasons he does not use that language. His example makes clear that people can indeed prepare to inherit their parents' spirit possession. However, they cannot necessarily expect the spirits to accept them; these apparently decide autonomously whom to possess after the parent's death. Humans, like these spirits, also decide whether to follow an heir and this process may also take a long time. Indeed, Simkoma's roles and responsibilities were also an indivisible whole. The process unfolding in Asséré differed somewhat from Lambek's description (2011)—in which relations with all the family's spirits were settled on a single daughter, an apparent theft of kinship—but in both cases everyone was evading, giving away or ignoring their inheritances. The siblings tried to find a way to interpret their father's inheritance as divisible, or to divide it, taking on the aspects they were comfortable with or that suited them, while letting the others go.

Lambek further argues that enacting succession makes kinship relationships irreversible:

“Succession implies success, and it may be depicted as a matter of passing some kind of test. The unsuccessful sibling arrives too late. Acts [...] are irreversible. They cannot be taken back, at least not without an equally complex act of undoing. Whereas, from a structural perspective, kinship can be construed as reversible or cyclical (Geertz 1973; Lévi-Strauss 1969), from the action perspective, kinship is a matter of going forward, not back. Birth, sacrifice, and circumcision and other forms of scarification are vivid exemplifications of acts that cannot be taken back (Lambek, 2007)” (Lambek 2011, p. 5).

Adding a temporal perspective could modify this understanding of (adult) action. There is something profoundly inactive about an agency that takes the form of waiting to be identified or chosen by others without decisively stepping into that space oneself. Despite the pressure to make decisions around final events such as death and burial, one can also buy time by avoiding or—like Simkoma’s sons—indefinitely postponing decisions about succession. Although strong rivalries existed between the two eldest brothers (which had been passed down from their mothers), delaying the decision reorganised the sequence of events and necessarily made the timing of actions seem less linear. The fact that kinship always moves forward does not preclude it from involving as much loss as gain. Certain acts cannot be taken back, but what they produce or create can be stolen or destroyed later.

This power to act and shape, in the sense of agency within certain social structures, was particularly visible in the reinterpretation of the gifts for the dead.

#### 4 Adult performative action: The bridal gift in the face of death

Toungba was the best at finding creative solutions for delicate situations. His strategies included joining previously separate issues and letting potential conflicts peter out. I had originally intended to buy a cow as a funeral offering, which I knew was customary and even obligatory if one could afford it (as I could). However, I did not know how this would interact with my host brothers’ gift as they had also bought a cow together, which affected my role in the sibling group. Toungba’s idea—calling it a bridal gift—meant I could be seen not only as a foster daughter but also as a married (host) sister with corresponding rights and duties in the sibling group. This made me a co-decider, especially in comparison with my host sister, who only occasionally attended our sibling meetings and was rarely asked about her opinion.

This was because it is quite common in Kabre society for a son-in-law to delay the bridal gift until his father-in-law’s death ceremony and add a cow to the obligatory gifts of sheep, beer, or liquor. This is, effectively, the last public opportunity to resolve an unpaid bridal debt and thus legitimate the marriage. Presenting my cow as a bridal gift from my husband resolved several potential conflicts. First, it was slightly bigger than my brothers’ and interpreting it as a bridal gift meant that they would not be compared. Second, we did not need to wait for Simkoma’s mother’s brothers to sacrifice it at the ceremony: my brothers could slaughter it on Saturday, reducing the ritual charge and also leaving enough time to cook it before Sunday morning.

About 20 men attended the slaughter in the open area behind Simkoma’s homestead. All the other women hid in the shade of the homestead, as killing is men’s business, but as a white woman I could be out in plain sight. As the others held the cow, Kodjo, the firstborn, wielded the knife. The cow did not resist or cry out, a good sign that showed that the spirits were satisfied and had accepted the gift. They brought the meat inside and examined it. I felt queasy: it was hot and the smell of blood was intense. I let the others distribute the meat as I had no idea who was entitled to what or what to put in which pot.



On Sunday, we prepared for my bridal gift by donning our ceremonial clothes for the first time. As a daughter and bride, I was led to Simkoma's farm accompanied by a sheep decorated with a white cloth, millet beer, liquor, drums and singing. We circled the courtyard and went inside. Toungba represented Simkoma and my elder brother Kodjo represented me.

*Toungba:* Why are the drums beating in my courtyard?

*Kodjo:* Tabea's husband found something to give you because he took your daughter.

*Toungba:* (...) Does everyone agree with that? Her brothers, the daughter herself, the local authorities?

*Kodjo:* Yes, everyone agrees.

*Toungba* [addressing a relative from the south]: Are all the authorities here as well as there [in Germany] in agreement with this? *[all laugh]*

*Relative from the south:* Yes, I confirm that.

*Toungba:* Then I accept the bridal gift.

Then, I was led to the stick that represented Simkoma's body and repeated after Toungba: "I, Tabea, give you, Simkoma, this sheep as a bridal offering from my husband." The sheep and a rooster were slaughtered in front of the funeral hut and beer was served.

On Sunday, the day of the memorial services, the brothers' bull was also killed at the farm. The mother's brothers had given permission for this, but they still wanted to distribute the meat themselves. The tension among the men in the courtyard was enormous; the women again hid inside. Kodjo once again wielded the knife and this cow also stayed calm. Aninam, Simkoma's biological daughter, was the only woman to clean up the blood on the ground. As the beer was served, the mood gradually lightened. The cow was flayed and then covered with its skin and palm branches, and we waited for Simkoma's mother's brothers. This time, they were very cooperative when they came, taking their share and freely giving the rest to the women to cook for the feast.

Accompanied by Simkoma's widow, they then took the stick that represented his body from the hut to the courtyard. Dressed in Simkoma's finest clothes, it lay on a mat and a pillow. They blessed it and then the wild ride began. They carried the stick on their shoulders, accompanied by the festive congregation, dancing, singing and drumming. We retraced Simkoma's path through the village from his birthplace, where another rooster and a sheep were killed and the oldest relative said a blessing for the ancestors. Another short dance took place in my courtyard; then the procession went through the village square and finally arrived at the traditional grave of the kin group. There, the stick was undressed and thrown into the bush. One of Simkoma's cousins knocked the blade off an old hoe and threw it onto the burial mound. I had to cry again.

Dusk came, and then night. We returned to the homestead, where we ate and drank. A DJ played music until almost dawn, but I was soon exhausted and barely saw anything of my brothers.

The competition between sons-in-law over gifts at funerals in southern Benin has been compared with potlatches (Frey Nakonz 1991, p. 187), but any potential competition between me and my brothers was defused when my cow became a bridal

gift. This also reinterpreted and rebalanced our social roles, showing both how goods are transformed within the sphere of prestige and what performative processes enable social learning towards social adulthood. As my narrative shows, my brothers and I learned to become more sovereign during the festival.

However, we did not consider the potential of increasing the pressure on Aninam, whose husband had refused to come with a bridal gift. Although my husband (and children) were also absent, I had still somehow indirectly exposed her. Shortly after I returned to Germany after the ceremonies, she died. Pakpedong told me she had not gone home after the ceremony but stayed with her in-laws in Lower Asséré. Although the brothers repeatedly advised her to return to her husband, she refused. When it was time for sowing, her husband called looking for her, and shortly afterwards she died. No one understood why. She had seemed so lively when I was there. Pakpedong wanted to send Pakilinam south for her husband, who came the next week and confessed to having killed his wife. He had avoided Simkoma's death ceremony but claimed he had been intending to bring Aninam the next year and give a sheep. However, she had insisted on attending the ceremonies alone without a bridal gift, making him so angry that he killed her through witchcraft. Aninam was buried in Asséré and her brothers let the husband go. Pakpedong said everyone considered him too dangerous and he had already been punished by being left alone with five children.

Here, it is helpful to compare Lambek's definition of witchcraft, a concept for "addressing unhappy conditions" (Lambek 2021), with Piot's, who framed it as dealing with extraordinary events (2010). Although I do not see the expression of problematic kin relationships though this form of action as extraordinary, I agree that its fatal consequences were. I can say no more about the relationship between Aninam and her husband, only grieve for her and her motherless children. But I would still like to follow Lambek's interpretation and consider the potentially existential consequences of "unhappy conditions" like marital conflict among adult humans.

Because the bride gift is linked to the death ceremonies in the Kabre region, it is the most prominent occasion for resolving any accumulated intergenerational social debts between parents and children (in-law). Not settling these debts during the father-in-law's lifetime can be interpreted as a determined maintenance of the social relationship (Graeber 2011), or, more generally, as showing that matters remain open-ended and potentially reversible. The deficit opened by the unpayable social debt to the parents means that the relationship remains unequal. The sons' death offering and the son-in-law's bridal offering pay the debt publicly, making the relational structure one of equal adults. The death ceremony takes place on the same date as the bridal gift to guarantee maximum publicity and witnesses. Before the 1960s in Asséré, the process of proving oneself in adolescence was tied to the negotiating of arranged marriages between children, before the bride left her father's house (Häberlein 2016). Today, the couple proves itself before the (delayed) bridal gift. Having at least two children is crucial to obtaining the full status of wife and mother as it demonstrates the continuity of the couple's relationship. A father who witnesses this in life completes the process of marriage and clarifies the social status of his daughter, but after his death, the matrimonial union of a daughter can be

recognised by the surviving relatives, especially the bride's brothers, who will also continue to exercise a special role for their sister and her children, as Simkoma's mother's brothers did. To officially present oneself as the son-in-law of one's wife's family is highly normatively charged in the Kabre area (and many other parts of West Africa). In this fragile moment, the (new) son-in-law is vulnerable: his strengths and weaknesses of character are on display and he is morally evaluated as a person. In this process, kinship and social roles are publicly displayed, defined and created. The son-in-law's gifts, which must be consumed immediately, show his ability to provide for the daughter of the house and their children.

Gifts for the dead, like those for the bride, are already removed from the sphere of the commodity economy; when delivered during the death ceremonies they are also redirected from the dead to the living. Thus, adult children exercise agency over the older generation—who become ancestors—and step into their roles. The younger generation now regulates social matters within itself. The entire ritual process is oriented towards normative rules, but these must be permanently adapted. The real situation of all participants is probably never ideal, as my sibling group demonstrated. Material resources may be insufficient, one person from the sibling group may be missing or sick, or someone may intentionally or accidentally interfere with the ritual itself. In the events surrounding Simkoma's death, the sibling group seems to have continuously and situationally exercised interpretive sovereignty and agency despite all the difficulties, in accord with Bateson's idea (1989) that adulthood and adult action are shown, above all, in the constant confrontation between discontinuities, tensions and situationally necessary pragmatism.

For the bride, the bridal gift signifies social recognition as a wife and mother, as well as protection by linking her back to her original family. For the couple, it affirms the marital union. Their children are blessed by the maternal family and the wife's brothers recognise their role as a mother's brother.

Death and marriage are significant events in the life course. To understand them, it is helpful to move away from seeing them as single points in time. Showing oneself as an adult and socially mature person in the face of dying, death and marriage is a developmental process that can take place over a longer period.

## 5 Conclusion: Adulthood as a process, potentialities included

In concluding, I return to Lambek, a rare author who addresses adulthood in the face of death:

“In the resolutions of adulthood, one can observe kinship relatively undisturbed by theories or processes of biological (substantive) connection. Relationships unfold and transform in ethically complex ways and have both overt social and deep psychological dimensions, whose consequences and relative weight vary according to the modality of expression. [...] The deaths of their parents have proved difficult in different ways for the siblings in this case, as each struggles to find the means both to become a socially and psychologically relatively autonomous adult and to remain caring for and under the care of the others. [...]

But, when the lines of succession are ambiguous, plural, or overlapping, when there are no clearly demarcated and decisive rituals of succession, the result can be conflict as well as connection. [...] Succession may be conceptualized and enacted simultaneously as a gift from the parent and as theft by the (adult) child.” (Lambek 2011, p. 11)

Lambek describes two of his host-sisters during his research in Mayotte after the death of their parents, whereas I introduce my Togolese sibling group and late host father Simkoma. (Like Lambek, I steal kinship as a researcher). I conclude my reflections on the processual and unintended coming of age when faced with the death of one’s parents with the following.

My sibling group was not harmonious. On the contrary, individuals’ actions variously conflicted and competed with, or complemented, each other. Conflicts could persist but also be resolved: for example, Assérédema repeatedly confirmed his long-standing role as a troublemaker through witchcraft, whereas Kodjo wanted to exercise his privileges as the firstborn despite his alcoholism. People behave unpredictably to some extent, even when a normative script seems to dictate “right” or “appropriate” behaviour. During Simkoma’s death and funeral ceremonies, personhood-constituting behaviour (Lambek 2015) became individually visible. During this vital conjuncture (Johnson-Hanks 2002; Evans 2014), the sibling group acquired adult agency in the face of the unthinkable and proved itself capable and worthy of burying and honouring Simkoma. We learned to shape negotiation processes, individually and as a group. We acquired “wealth in knowledge” (Guyer 1995; Johnson-Hanks 2016), in the sense of being adults.

Although a normative structure helps with properly responding to a death, especially when grieving or angry, these norms must be interpreted and adapted in accordance with financial capacity, social scope and any competing normative scripts—here, those for funerary and bridal offerings and those for Christian and animistic rituals. These decisions had to be negotiated by the sibling group to achieve a minimal consensus in the face of differing interests. I think such situational adaptation of normative scripts is the basis of an often subtle social change. However, it is specifically the liminality of death that opens the windows of opportunity that Berger describes: “Death offers a creative space for rethinking life and reformulating social relationships because of its inherent ambiguity” (2015, p. 4). Both examples shown here represent how adults shape social change without consciously doing so. Their creative space is the semiosphere, given what is normatively expected and what seems necessary and economically feasible in the historical present.

The funeral ceremony also concerns the recognition of marital unions. Proving oneself a worthy son-in-law also has a direct impact on the couple’s relationship and the future of their children. We can likewise use the example of marriage as a process rather than a moment to redirect the social understanding of time to a more processual one. The long term need to prove oneself as a marriage partner or son-in-law corresponds to my understanding of adult personhood, which must prove itself and is thus always processual. Care for the living can (but need not) be performed in the face of care for the dead. Aninam’s simmering marital conflict became fatal when her husband refused to offer a bridal gift. During my immersion in the field,

I moved from the role of daughter to sister (Häberlein 2020). In all cases, what is negotiated at the edge of funerals (Thamann and Christodoulaki 2021) can clearly have existential significance for the bereaved.

The family has continued to delay choosing Simkoma's successor. The possibility of postponing decisions, discussing them repeatedly without reaching a conclusion, or avoiding them altogether without denying their necessity in principle may be part of the "potentiality of personhood" (Lambek 2021) for both individuals and the (sibling) group. When adults must deal with the discontinuities of life (Bateson 1989), in the face of "unhappy conditions" (Lambek 2021), the responsible action can paradoxically be to make no decision at all. In other words, social time is shaped by adult agents and intentional inaction is also a part of their power to shape.

Not mastering the challenges of social adulthood—or even rejecting it as through witchcraft, alcoholism or one's own death—are further alternatives in this process. The temporality of the life course is a crucial challenge here. Reaching adulthood in the sense of social maturity means that each person should live a morally "good life" (Durham 2017). Furthermore, after one's father dies it is important to be able to cope with one's own economic challenges as a provider and supporter and thus achieve economic autonomy. Both responsibilities are interconnected: they can remain unmet but are still constitutive of personhood in social adulthood.

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