

7 Moving through the land

Consolation and space in Tiwi Aboriginal death rituals

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Introduction

The Tiwi Aborigines of North Australia have a cycle of mortuary rites in which territorial passage, wailing and consolation are interlinked. Ideally, the rites start in the localities of the living and with intervals go on in space and time until the beginning of the final rite at the burial place, an area reserved for the spirits of the dead. In the ritual drama, given its purpose to direct the spirit of the dead from the world of the living to the world of the dead, the people of different bereavement status all play a role in the remembrance and dissolution of a particular metaphorical relationship with the deceased. In this context compassionate support and protection are given to the bereaved. This chapter focuses on the emotional geography of the Tiwi death rites, the dialogues with the deceased in wailing and laments, and the ways in which the ritual drama gives consolation.

Consolation has been given far too little attention in the anthropology of death, let alone the link between consolation and place or space. According to Klass (2013: 610), ‘To be consoled is to be comforted. Solace is found within the sense of being connected to a reality that transcends the self.’ ‘Consolation involves a shift of perspective and an experience of meaning in spite of suffering’, in the words of Norberg, Bergsten and Lundman (2001: 544). They make clear that the person in need of consolation due to suffering and the person mediating consolation ‘share the suffering in reciprocal presence and availability’ (ibid.: 548). As is the case with grief and mourning (Maddrell and Sidaway 2010: 1–2), it ‘presupposes space and time’ for consolation to take place (Norberg et al. 2001: 550). What is more, as we will see, the Aboriginal *Weltanschauung* is place-centred (Swain 1993; Myers 2002; Venbrux 2015). Stanner has aptly designated this worldview, known as The Dreaming, with the word ‘everywhen’ (1979: 24). Places can become significant as a result of their identification with the dead (Myers 1986: 134–135; Rose 1992: 69–73; Rose 1996: 70–71; Langton 2002: 260ff). Furthermore, the death rites entail a territorial passage; the transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead being perceived as a journey (Reid 1979: 326; cf. Van Gennep 1960: 153–154). The rites allow the bereaved to express their

grief and to receive ‘maximum support and protection’ (Morphy 1984: 63). This solidarity has been noted in many places in Aboriginal Australia, not only among the Yolngu and the Tiwi (Brandl 1971) in the tropical north, but also among the Martu of the Western Desert: ‘Every funeral is well attended and the bereaved have dozens of people giving them comfort and seeing to their needs. Bonds of sentiment and networks of reciprocity ensure that no one grieves alone or without support’ (Tonkinson 2008: 49). Durkheim (1995 [1912]) draws heavily on Aboriginal mourning rites to make his argument about social cohesion (Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 33). In these rites, he writes, ‘there are tears and laments—in short, the most varied displays of anguished sorrow and a kind of mutual pity that takes up the entire scene’ (Durkheim 1995: 400; but see Venbrux 1995: 194–195, 2017a).

This chapter draws on my anthropological fieldwork among the Tiwi from Melville and Bathurst Islands, north off the Australian coast. I revisited my notes from a fourteen-month sojourn in 1988–1989 and five subsequent return visits (in 1991, 1994, 1998, 2002 and 2006) of short duration. One concrete case came to the fore as particularly suitable to illustrate and explain the interrelation between solace and space in Tiwi mortuary behaviour. The case which stands central here shows what happens when the most senior person of a territorial clan dies. If it were possible to follow what happens around the death of an important Aboriginal person, according to Thomson, this would offer the key to a full understanding of ‘the whole culture’ (cited in Morphy 1984: 127). Because of my good rapport with the bereaved spouse, I believe the present case can also convey something about individual grief (see Reid 1979: 326). Against the backdrop of the ethnographic record on the complex and intricate Tiwi death rites, I seek to foreground the nexus between space and consolation.

In a small-scale, kin-based society such as that of the Tiwi the death of a member has a considerable impact. Indigenous Australians appear to have a life expectancy of ten to twenty years less than other Australians. It is hard to get reliable figures, but the confrontation with death is a very frequent occurrence in the more traditionally oriented Aboriginal societies of North and Central Australia (Glaskin et al. 2008). Tiwi ‘mortality rates have been the worst in Australia’ (Hoy et al. 2017: 7). From 1986 onwards, their islands saw a wave of suicides, mainly by young men, and were said to have ‘the highest suicide rate in the world’ (Scott-Clark and Levy 2006). Hoy, Mott and McLeod (2017: 3) count a total of fifty suicides between 1985 and 2010. The number of Tiwi increased from about 1,900 to 2,500 people over that period, which was mainly due to a high birth rate. Robinson (1990) relates the contemporary Tiwi suicides to loss and mourning. Self-wounding is part of Tiwi grieving, but is commonly restrained by consociates. I found it striking that suicidal youths were often said to have visions of the spirit of their dead (grand)father, painted up with white clay and holding a spear; a conventional premonition of death. Cox suggests that suicidal Aboriginal youths consider ‘the repeated loss of relatives and friends’ as a demise of people who care about them: furthermore, she notes, ‘Amongst many of the young people, their socialisation into a world

of spirits appeared to produce a feeling of immortality, where death is a loss of a certain physical form and not the loss of life, of self or of agency' (Cox 2010: 251). Is it because they cannot find consolation in this world?

Offering the mourners consolation might be the mortuary ritual's *raison d'être*. The floccinaucinihilipilification of solace in the literature on death rites in Aboriginal Australia – or its sheer neglect – brings into focus the questionable assumption that the sorrow of a considerable number of the performers would be insincere. 'If relatives cry, lament, and beat themselves black and blue, the reason is not that they feel personally affected by the death of a kinsman', according to Durkheim (1995: 400). Osborne (1974: 111n2) even states that when an important Tiwi man dies 'no one feels any real grief, although grief is simulated'. The expressions of grief arise from social obligation or political aspirations. It seems to be rather presumptuous to deny other human beings true feelings. How would one know?

From the sudden shift in the expression of emotion Durkheim seems to infer that the emotions of grief are not authentic: 'If, at the very moment the mourners seem most overcome by the pain, someone turns to them to talk about some secular interest, their faces and tone often change instantly, taking on a cheerful air, and they speak with all the gaiety of the world' (Durkheim 1995: 400). When one realises, however, that Aboriginal people's switching of their expression of emotion involves a shift in focus from one significant person to another one, this behaviour should not be regarded as inconsistent and, therefore, inauthentic. To the contrary, not changing countenance while facing a living person (e.g., a joking friend) would imply a tie-breaking as when directed towards the deceased. The emotions are relational and with the exemption of avoidance relationships Tiwi point their lips towards the person addressed when making verbal statements (Venbrux 1995: 194–195). The European 'concept of the person as a bounded individual' (Bloch 1988: 15) does not apply in the case of these Aborigines. The body is the site in which significant social relations are incorporated, and death of the relative implies the wounding or (imaginary) loss of the respective body part. Simultaneously, body and land are related (Venbrux 1993; Grau 2005). For example, those who have one grandfather in common lose half of their face or have it injured when one of them dies. They find the lost half back or have the face healed at the location of the grandfather's grave, that is, where his spirit dwells. The place not only offers consolation, but is also perceived as empowered by the spirit, promoting health and well-being, including an abundance of food. Furthermore, the burial place is of crucial importance for establishing territorial rights in the surrounding area (Hart 1930a: 173). In the case I am about to discuss the woman who died was seen as the 'big boss' of the northwest of Melville Island.

Connections to country

Tiwi all belong to a specific exogamous matrilineal (*imunga*, 'skingroup'), but in the death rituals, as in the rights to land, the focus is on the patrilineal

affiliations of the deceased. When the spirit of the dying is supposed to leave the body, it is told in mourning songs to move away towards the burial places of paternal ancestors, or 'dreaming places' (that is the locations of the father's *imunga*: islets off the coast, a waterhole or a rock formation). The funeral and postfuneral rites are focused on directing the spirit of the deceased to those places where the ancestors 'live'. These places, although far away, are addressed and faced when the rites commence. People stamp the ground to call the attention of the spirits of the dead. A goose-feather ball on a cord may be thrown in the direction of the destination, a small rite that also projects the songs and dances across space.

Ritual calls and gestures, together with songs and dances, direct the spirit on a journey along places of totemic significance to its final destination. In the course of the ritual track the deceased's own totems are increasingly given centre stage. If the web of relationships is considered, totemic as well as social ones, the spirit is gradually closed in. This is also expressed spatially. The apotheosis entails a meeting of the living and the spirits of the dead. The latter are kept at bay by the workers, using fighting sticks. In conjunction with this, the final mortuary ritual, the *iloti*, is performed by the spirits and the living actors. At the conclusion of the ritual carved and painted posts are erected around the grave. The posts represent metaphorical bodies, fixing the spirits to the place.

A collective wailing occurs at certain intervals when the distance from the deceased is increased in space and time: when the corpse is put in the coffin, when the dead person is interred, when the deceased is left behind in the graveyard, etc. Participants in the rituals also wail on arrival and they wail at the conclusion of their performances. People strongly identify with their 'country', i.e. one of the eight districts the islands are currently divided into or a part thereof. In wailing, songs, dances and ritual gestures, specific characteristics of, for example, a particular animal or bird abundant in the place in question, are often stressed.

Joan Puruntatameri was the most senior person of the country Munupi. In this she followed her father Tipolei and father's father Tipaklippa. Her father had ten wives (Hart 1928–29: 48). Her mother Tomukareiomau was a daughter of Mangatopi, the main leader of the country where the other township in Melville Island, Milikapiti, was later established. In 1943 Joan married Justin Puruntatameri (Pilling 1958: 75). He was from another part in the same country, where his father's father Korupu had been the leader. Korupu had been an influential man with eleven wives (Hart 1928–29: 2). Justin's mother Tupangkwopeio was a leader in her own right. In the late 1980s Justin was the leader of Mupuni, one of the eight countries represented in the Tiwi Land Council. He was also the undisputed ceremonial leader of Melville Island.

A number of foraging trips with Justin and his family gave me a better understanding of their relationship to their country. Indeed, as Watson puts it with regard to the Walbiri: 'The sensorium and the spatio-conceptual aspects flowing from Aboriginal autochthonous relationships with land are distinct

and quite unlike the distance relations of western representational systems' (2003: 293). We had to call out to the spirits of the dead for their assistance in obtaining food. Once we drifted out to sea with a broken outboard motor while it was getting dark and a rainstorm was coming. The grandchildren were instructed to call out for help to the spirit of their grandmother (deceased wife of Justin's elder brother) buried behind the mangroves bordering the coast, whereupon the outboard motor started working again and we got home safe. Another time, when with Justin and Joan and their children and families at Woolawunga, the rain (*pakadringa*) was driven away with a rite of throwing up sand as an inversion of the rain and an accompanying call ('puri puri tuwari'). Furthermore, Justin showed me the cavity at the beach in Imalu where a mythological rainbow serpent (*maritji*) dwelled. Only his people could approach the place unharmed, others he had to hold under his armpit. The smell from his sweat protected them. Further down the coast at a place called Teipu, characterised by a white cliff that formed an important source of clay for painting the body, the sea had taken a part of the land. The land that disappeared was experienced as such a loss that the people from the country Munupi decided to perform mortuary rites for it.

The nature of the close connections to the land suggest that the land is considered 'a living entity' (Grau 2005: 158). Our digging out of *kulama* yams for the annual increase ritual in April 1989, for example, would result in big rains in Justin's territory Rangini far away. Justin was convinced of this. He always spoke of the place as extremely rich in food. To feel well again he very much longed to go there after the death of his wife Joan. Mourning taboos made that he could not kill anything but, after initial cleansing rituals of the land had taken place, we spent two days clearing the road to Rangini. To be in his country in the company of his grandchildren, clearing it by burning pockets of tall grass, eased Justin's grief (cf. Ponsonnet 2014: 45). It also made him feel good to go with his children and grandchildren to all the places along the coast in Munupi closely associated with his beloved wife.

When the turtles vanished

Joan Puruntatameri was ill for a long time, at least for one and a half years. Several times she was on the verge of death, but every time she recovered. Joan stayed in Milikapiti on the north coast of Melville Island, where her eldest son lived and where she wanted to be buried next to her father. Her husband Justin and their children often went out hunting and gathering, believing it was the bush food that gave her strength. In spite of the fact that she preferred to stay home, Joan was sent to the hospital in Darwin on the mainland twice. The last time, the diagnosis had been clear. Joan was suffering from lung cancer: a big round spot, she related. The doctors could not do anything more for her.

As she lived on, Joan came to Pirlangimpi, on the sea strait between Melville and Bathurst Island in the northwest of Melville, where her husband, her

five daughters and her youngest son lived. Her second eldest daughter, a health worker, and her youngest daughter, a teacher, took care of her on a daily basis. They were both single. Later they were assisted by a married sister. Joan's condition fluctuated. At times, she felt well. She played cards, danced and sang in the ceremonies, and even went out camping for a couple of days at Woolawunga, a northern beach location at Melville Island's west coast. At other times her condition worsened.

'They came say lovely sorry for me', said Joan, reflecting on the visits to her deathbed in the past few days. The senior Tiwi woman had recovered a bit and even taken a stroll to the beach. There, on the front beach, she was giving instructions for her funeral. She pointed to the waves. When the tide was out, she joked, she would have to be buried in the beach that had become exposed. Her foot would be revealed and stick above the sand when the tide came in, waving up and down with the incoming sea water. In other words, she would participate in the turtle dance, her foot making the characteristic movement with the flaps, at her own funeral. Joan happened to be the eldest person and leader of the turtle clan. Joan's clan used to perform the turtle and the tide dance.

On Tuesday 25 July 1989 she fell really ill again, leaving her bedridden. The next day her eldest daughter, on holiday in Perth, was called back. Things turn bad on Sunday 30 July. On the Monday afternoon Joan seems to be dying. In front of the house her husband, assisted by a son-in-law, has made a big shelter to provide shade with a roof of coconut palm leaves. Relatives from Milikapiti camp in the front yard, so do relatives from Bathurst Island who have come as well, as have almost all of Joan's children and grandchildren. People from Pirlangimpi also come to visit. Justin sits at her bed. Joan sleeps most of the time. Now and then she opens her eyes, asking a female visitor where she had been all the time.

The following five days Joan remains severely ill. Twice her pulse fully disappears, but she comes to life again. Thursday 3 August, Joan's half-sister, a nun, arrives from Papua New Guinea. At noon the next day, women from Pirlangimpi say that Joan is 'nearly finished'. Her husband and children, and a lot of other people, in addition, are sitting inside with her. Most from Bathurst Island had gone back for payday. At the local health centre people from elsewhere call or have to be called by the daughters to keep them posted on Joan's condition. Her pulse falls away a few times. When I visit her in the late afternoon the next day, her hand feels cold. Joan has become very thin. Her eyes are half open and her mouth opens now and then too. A sarong has been draped over her lower body. Her half-sister and a female friend put pieces of cloth soaked in cold water on her side and chest. Joan wipes them away and scratches her shrivelled belly and breasts. Justin has come to sit with her too. Outside life goes on. Justin's siblings and their families camp under the shade at their respective fires.

That night, at a quarter past one, my Aboriginal neighbours wake me and say 'that old lady is finished'. We walk to Joan's house, talking about playing

cards. The female neighbour is in an uplifted mood as she had been winning. It is relatively cold this night. About thirty metres from the house the neighbour lifts her arms and lets the sleeves of her sweater slide back a little: 'shaking', she says. Two metres towards the boundary of the front yard, she starts rubbing in her eyes, holding up her elbows to the same height. Next, she cries loudly, walks into the house, cries and returns wailing. She sits down with a group of women. The loud crying and wailing that comes from the house is the sound of the jungle fowl. All cry in the same way, go to the dying woman and come back. All the people who were inside leave the house. Joan has died. For ten days she has been severely ill. Trice her pulse disappeared. Justin is taken outside by two women, each holding him by one arm. They lead him from the stairs (to the house that is on little pilasters) to a chair. Justin sits down. Soon however he climbs up to the side of the little stairway (about 80 cm in height) and lets himself drop backwards on his back. He sits down on the chair again and sings. Two young men now hold his pulses. They walk with him to the side of the house, around the room with Joan's corpse, and return. Justin cries and sings.

Loud wailing and hitting oneself with the fists, or an object like a stick or a stone, is the conventional way of 'saying sorry' (*nuripmiori*). In saying sorry Tiwi address themselves towards the dying, the deceased, or the close relatives of the deceased. The dying, or when they are not able to do this, the close relatives of these persons or the dead stop the wailers, holding them so that they cannot harm themselves. Sometimes they say 'it is enough' (*weya tua*). These responses show that the wailing is accepted as an expression of relatedness and sorrow. In other words, the grief is shared and empathy shown by the self-wounding (Ponsonnet 2014: 45). Those who intervene, in turn, seek 'to protect the bereaved' and offer their 'support and concern' (Reid 1979: 330). The widower is looked after and people take care he does not inflict serious injuries on himself.

From 11 o'clock onwards people were to come. Joan's body had been laid in state on a steel frame of a bed under the shade in front of her house. Justin sits on the bed aside of Joan, his eldest sister on the other side of her. The daughters and sons are sitting close to their dead mother. A few relatives from Milikapiti do so as well. The division of people over space reflects social distance, the various categories of kin being grouped together and a gender division being upheld. The more distantly related people sit at some forty metres away from the corpse. On arrival, before they go to this place, they say sorry either facing the deceased or the bereaved. The visitors cry loudly. They might hit or harm a part of the body indicating their relationship to the dead (see further below). In saying sorry, men in general hit themselves with their fists on the loins and women do so with the right fist on the left shoulder (in the past, women carried a piece of bark to cover their pubic region in ceremonies, hence they could use only one fist).

A few metres from the bed an old man, Joan's son-in-law, is singing: '(dead woman saying:) I do not want all these *lorula* [semi-moiety, cluster of clans] to

come up and dance for me'. Albeit Joan's daughters had been promised to this man, they did not marry him. Whenever he turned up, however, they had to provide him with food. The son-in-law lets his mother-in-law say that his people ought not to be obliged to attend and dance for her. Simultaneously, he refers to the customary avoidance relationship they had.

Then a first round of dancing starts. Two granddaughters of Joan are adorned with a goose-feather ball around their neck. The ball represents a baby (evoking the image of crossing the arms across the chest with the hands towards the shoulders as when a baby is carried on the shoulders) and elevates their status, that is, makes them 'important'. The emotions flare up when the coffin arrives and is placed in the shade by the ritual workers. Justin falls across the bed and tries to hit his head on the coffin. He is prevented from harming himself. A relative feels his head and looks through his hair to ascertain he is not wounded.

After the dancing a Roman Catholic priest celebrates mass. A choir from Bathurst Island sings the hymns in Tiwi. The audience assumes a rather passive mood until their emotions are suddenly triggered by a song about the deceased's country, Imalu. They wail and cry loudly, which intensifies when the lid is nailed on the coffin. This continues when the coffin is placed on the back of a truck for departure to the cemetery.

A few women are crying at a recent grave of a stillborn when the procession arrives. The workers scrape out the final bits of earth from the new grave that has been dug by them. Justin sings, hitting himself repeatedly with the fists at the loins. He makes the gesture of a butterfly, following his late (classificatory) father, and sings meanwhile. Next, he drops alongside the coffin. Together with two of his daughters he clings to the coffin, attempting to hold it back from being put into the grave. The coffin moves back and forth in the wrestle of the tangle of people. The deceased's daughters wail loudly. One who lived the last half year with her family at her mother's house has to be held back and seems on the verge of collapsing. Her tongue has turned blue, her belly is shaking fiercely, and she produces ripping, piercing wails. A granddaughter of the deceased, wearing a goose-feather ball, is in a similar state. The intense expression of emotion continues during the burial ceremony. Her father feels her forehead as she seems to faint from lack of oxygen.

The coffin is placed in the open grave. In the collective wailing the sound of the jungle fowl, the dreaming from Justin's people found in their country, can be recognised (cf. Basedow 1913: 310; Puruntatameri et al. 2001: 93). Justin stands at the edge and grabs a spade from one of the workers, who keeps holding the handle, and lets the blade land on his head several times. Next, he jumps into the grave and burns his pubic hair with a lighter. Meanwhile he sings: '(dead woman saying:) do not burn the whole lot (of pubic hair)/ because your wife might growl at you'. Thereafter, a dance and song ceremony around the closed grave commences. On this occasion not all of the relatives are allowed to dance yet. Those that are dance towards the grave. Joan's eldest son shows his emotion by performing an energetic dance, letting

the sand spat spray up high. Two other men end their dance by making a somersault over the grave and landing on their back. Others throw the sand from the grave mound over their head. The ceremony concludes with Justin, the widower, having his whole body painted with white clay by Joan's half-sister. Meanwhile he performs a mourning song. He leaves his loin cloth, worn during ceremonies for years on end, on a stick at the grave. The children and grandchildren step over the grave mound before leaving the burial place.

On 10 August no one is on the beach at 5 pm. The far-out tide just starts coming in. A sea eagle is circling in the air. Justin walks onto the beach in a straight line from his eldest daughter's place towards his dinghy. Justin wears a loin cloth and a belt, his face and body still covered with white clay. He smokes. Justin tells that at Woolawunga and further north along the coast nothing is to be caught anymore. All fish and turtles have moved to Seagull Island (a sand island north off Cape van Diemen on the north-west coast of Melville Island, that is, north of Joan's territory Imalu). At the reefs near Woolawunga and further north there are no fish and turtles left. People have to wait for a fortnight before they can harpoon turtles again. Then the first turtle that will be caught cannot be cut before some totemic dances (turtle and tide) have been performed. Justin says that he cannot go in the dark to his place (because of his deceased wife's spirit) and, therefore, has to return home.

Ritual cleansing of the dead's territory

The night and early morning had been cold for Justin, who was wearing only a loin cloth. In the morning he had warmed himself at a fire. Later he sat in the sun to become warmer. Justin stuck to the rules he had set to himself as mourner. He was to stay away from places frequented by his deceased wife.

At 10 am the next day, 12 August, a cattle truck and four pickup trucks loaded with people leave Pirlangimpi for the dry-season camp at Woolawunga. The unsealed road ends at a high point. People split in groups, women and men separated, and members of the Puruntatameri and Tipaklippa patrilineages central. Justin is painted with white clay and wearing a new loin cloth and has a goose-feather ball around his neck. He sings and walks back and forth as a widower in ritual fashion: '(dead woman saying:) I am the head of the Rumakulumi [the people from Pirlangimpi]'. A classificatory mother of the deceased wails softly but audibly. The male workers, all in loincloths, collect branches with green leaves. Justin goes ahead, meanwhile singing: 'maybe that fire will go/they burn'em up to Tokwiangumpi (burial place of dead woman's father's brother)'. The men address the spirits of the dead with a prolonged mosquito call. This utterance is said to clear their voice. Justin sings: 'my friends (dead woman's fathers)/maybe there was talking about it all night'. Next the son of the dead woman's father's eldest brother's daughter holds his right hand up and calls out the place names given by Joan's father and his brothers and their father: 'Pulangumpura,

Watjutap, Putriamirra, Timilura, Purapuntri, Tokwiangumpi.’ This means that these places are no longer taboo and the animals and fish can come back.

In an open space towards the beach the people of Joan’s clan perform the turtle dance. Their leader composes the accompanying lyrics: ‘turtle (*tarakulani*), we got to find it’. Then the group halts a second time, now on the edge of the bush and the beach, and once more does the turtle dance. Following this, they move on to the beach. The ritual drama that unfolds is the track of the turtle laying eggs on the beach. Where the farthest point of the track up onto the beach is located a woman and a man perform the turtle dance. They are paternal cousins of the deceased. At the spot besides where one normally finds the eggs Joan’s granddaughters have to perform the turtle dance as well. Justin walks up to his ankles in the sea water and then up to this place on the beach. He sings: ‘(dead woman’s father saying:) I am the big boss of this country.’ The man who called out the place names does the same, but ritually cleanses his arms with sea water. Coming from the top and moving to the sea goes the main paternal cousin, a grandchild of Tipaklippa like Joan. Nearing the water, he makes the movements of the turtle as in the dance. Two steps into the sea he dives like a turtle and swims about ten metres under water. He resurfaces and hits first with his right arm and then with his left arm on the water. Finally, he ritually cleanses his whole body with water, removing the mourning taboos.

From the beach the people walk back into the bush to the place where Joan slept. There the ritual workers make a fire and ritually cleanse the place and the bereaved close relatives with smoke. Justin sings: ‘(dead woman saying:) I think he will put his footsteps on top of mine’. He hits himself and wails facing the spot where his deceased wife slept. The smoking is followed by a dance and song ceremony (*yoi*) in which the various categories of bereaved perform. Justin sings: ‘(dead woman saying:) they dancing where our country’ and names all the places. Joan’s paternal cousin (*mutuni*), and second in line of the turtle clan, holds a harpoon. He sings about the spiritual conception for the deceased’s children (*mamurapi turah*), who are about to dance: ‘He made a lovely two-sided barbed spear.’ The dance enacts the spearing of the father by the spirit child in a dream. The singer cleverly relates that to the location, the deceased and her father Tipolei. The latter had a reputation as a fierce fighter and killer with barbed spears. Tipolei and his brother had blocked access to their land by placing upright several sets of two-sided, barbed spears cross-wise, and connected with a bush rope, on the beach of Woolawunga. Only after extensive negotiations, white people, who called Tipolei ‘King’, were granted access. Tipolei would have been the bereaved father (*umandani*), who ‘made’ the deceased, in the ceremony: the two-sided, barbed spear is female and can only refer to the dead daughter.

Other songs express how two other clans got frightened, to which a ritual worker added: ‘He [Tipolei] made the fire all around, they run away.’ The maternal children (*mamurapi pulanga*) conventionally call out to be breastfed to no avail. Hence the accompanying song to their dance: ‘Oh, you got no

milk/so we got to swim in the sea (make them cold).’ The lyrics make clear they are members of the turtle clan. Two sons-in-law dance with small branches with leaves wiping their shoulders, concluding with putting these aside. The dance (*impala*) for the deceased mother-in-law (*amprinua*) emphasises the avoidance relationship; the shoulder being the body part where one feels pain when something is wrong with the mother-in-law. Instead of mentioning the hurt shoulder directly, the lyrics often tell of a wing or a branch broken off. In this case they allude to that image: ‘They carry wood and fell down with that wood.’ Finally, the ritual workers (distant in-laws, *ambaruwi*) and the widower (*ambaru*) dance. Justin spirals around his lined-up daughters with both hands in the air. The workers dance in their distinctive styles. Joan’s maternal half-sister (*putakka*) is placed in the middle. They kick her leg, the body part hurt or ‘lost’ due to the death. Justin, the widower, also spirals around her, hands up and opening and closing his legs.

Next, he lies down on his belly on the spot where his deceased wife had slept. Justin cries. Then he turns on his side and sings: ‘(dead woman saying:) maybe we will have sex while I am sleeping.’ He rolls in the hot sand and ashes from the burnt down fire. Justin hits himself with a piece of wood. He wails and sings: ‘She used to live with me at Pirlangimpi, but she left me there.’ Meanwhile another senior man and relative takes away the piece of wood from the widower. This gesture evidences protection and concern. Comfort, according to Berndt, is also obtained from talking with the dead person in the lyrics: ‘The conversational dialogue, reminding the spirits of actual incidents in the past and pretending to plan for the future, serves to provide some comfort for the mourner, in an apparently casual fashion which dispenses with most of the more overt expressions of grief’ (Berndt 1950: 305). The widower continues this dialogue at Putramirra, a place and beach further north where the people attending the ceremony move on to next. The main reason is to make the calls of place names, indicating that the area is no longer taboo (*pukamani*) for turtles, fish, wallabies and so forth. The man who made the calls with his right hand raised had been asked to go up front at Woolawunga and Putramirra because his own mother, a paternal ‘sister’ (niece) of the deceased, had been buried there. Her spirit was considered powerful in setting the area free for the animals and for hunting and gathering.

The following afternoon Justin’s youngest son and a friend went to the reef in front of Woolawunga. They harpooned a turtle. This turtle was brought to the front beach at Pirlangimpi, where Joan’s paternal cousin and a few others of the turtle dreaming danced before it could be cut. This had to be done with the first turtle after it had been taboo. One of the deceased’s daughters stated: ‘All turtles are back now, but last week nothing at Woolawunga, no turtles and no eggs.’ Her father, however, told me he followed his father and father’s father. That is to say, he stuck to mourning taboos. He could not eat food – turtle, fish and so forth – from Woolawunga and that area, and also no animals such as bandicoot and wallaby. It was alright to eat them for other

people, but Justin had to wait until after the wet season, when the rain had cleansed or washed away the *pukumani* (taboo) from the land.

Postfuneral rites from Pirlangimpi to Karumurarimili

The widower would have a first, partial release from his mourning taboos on the first of October, at the conclusion of the final rites for his deceased wife, when I would give him a ritual washing (*moluki*). Joan's half-sister, who lived in Port Moresby, had asked Justin to hurry up with the postfuneral rites so she could still attend them. Although he would have had to wait for at least half a year, Justin had said 'alright'. The postfuneral rites (called *pukamani*) for Joan would start in Pirlangimpi but end in another part of Melville Island, on the hill near Milikapiti, where Joan's father and brother were buried. The burial place is called Karumurarimili or Karangumungumili.

Justin had his face painted with yellow and white stripes. He had picked up the yellow ochre on the way back from Milikapiti, where Joan's half-sister had wanted to see her relatives. It is no coincidence that he had chosen these colours as they are emblematic for the deceased's (and his) country: the superb white clay is from Teipu and the best yellow ochre comes from Imalu, respectively south and north of Woolawunga, in the country Munupi (the best red ochre comes from somewhere else, namely Arapi in the southwest of Bathurst Island). Another association with the land concerns the pubic hair Justin scorched off in Joan's grave. The bodily hair is equated with the long grass that is burned down in the dry season (Venbrux 1995: 143). Malinowski already notes that among Aborigines the marital bond tends to last after death, 'and expiation must be made for the eventual new union' (1913: 87). Justin explained that he had to wait for a year before a promised wife could join him, another year for the second, and one more for the third. The regrown pubic hair was associated with the tall grass where one could have a tryst with a new lover.

In the morning of 18 August Joan's house is cleansed with smoke. Although Justin had his own little house, which he reoccupied the day before, in another part of the township, the encounter with the place of her death, taboo for the intermediate period, was very emotional. He sang intimate mourning songs and had to be restrained by others from harming himself. Next, we went to a burial place in the bush in the southwest of Melville Island for the final mortuary rites for a homicide victim that took one and a half days and the night in between (see Venbrux 1995: 183–222). Striking in the many death rites that Justin and his children and grandchildren attended was their sharing of grief with the newly bereaved, or with the previously bereaved in the case of postfuneral rituals, and obtaining support from one another. This was the case at a funeral of a man at Wurrumiyanga (Nguiu) on Bathurst Island on 24 August, the final rites for two women there on 27 August, intermediary rites for a man in Pirlangimpi, Melville Island, on 28 August, and the final rites for a man there on 2 September, where Justin bit his goose-feather ball in

his dance performance, and a funeral of a woman in Milikapiti, Melville Island, on 9 September 1989. Besides obtaining solace, Joan's close relatives mobilised support for the final rites for her. The day after we had cut free the road to his (sub)country Rangini, Justin felt emotionally ready to commence the *pukumani* for his deceased wife.

Shortly after midday, on 11 September, people came together under the shade, covered with coconut palm leaves, in front of Joan's house in Pirlan-gimpi. The men are wearing loin cloths. Many, including Justin's daughters, are painted with white clay. The youngest daughter was teaching in Bathurst Island, but had returned home for the rites. Justin comes from the house of another daughter and enters Joan's house. He visits the room where his beloved wife had died. Joan's half-sister, who stood at the bed, told me Justin had thrown himself on top of Joan, saying: 'she was pretty'. The woman had tried to hold him back because her sister was still breathing. At the time of the ritual cleansing of the house Justin had prostrated himself on the bed again. Meanwhile he performed a mourning song. This time he wails loudly. He leaves the house, keeps standing in front of it and sings again a widower song, which he repeats under the shade. Ponsonnet (2014: 45–46, 205), writing on the Dalobon Aborigines, sees the visit to a place associated with the dead person as a strategy to overcome grief: 'Grief is intentionally revived on this occasion, but strictly monitored (one makes sure that close relatives will be around providing support, etc.)' (ibid.: 46). Justin's utterance at the time of Joan's death referred to her beauty. Joan was particularly proud of a photograph of them as a young couple (Elkin 1964: Fig. 8, opposite p. 95). She told me once, when we looked at the photo, that she was admired for her protruding breasts. Her absence now must have intensified rather than assuaged his grief. Justin put two axes ready under the shade and gave the sign that the ceremony could start.

The oldest grandson from Tikaklipa, the deceased's grandfather, composed the first song and danced as if cutting a tree. The various categories of bereaved dance as well, the women and men always as separate groups. The purpose of the axe-giving ritual (*walemani*) is to commission the ritual workers who will make the carved and painted grave posts to be erected around the grave at the conclusion of the final rites. At the end of the dance the axes are handed to selected workers. A second small ritual concerns the presentation of fire (*ikwonni*) to dry and darken the debarked tree trunks. On this occasion matches changed hands, whereas the dance gestures showed the old way of making fire with sticks. Finally, the paints (*tilamara*) to put on the carved posts are given. In this third ritual the gesture was made with a piece of white clay. The accompanying dance of painting one's face and arms underscores the close association between body and tree or land. During the three rites the ritual workers dance in the background.

At the conclusion the two axes are placed in the middle of the dancing ground. Justin, the actual widower, dances around with his hands in the air and opening and closing his legs towards the axes. He is the last to leave the

place, after having performed a mourning song. He expected that eleven grave posts from Milikapiti and eight from Pirlangimpi would be made for his deceased wife.

The next morning Justin pointed out a bloodwood tree that had to be cut at Blue Waters, an ancestral burial place not far from Pirlangimpi in Joan's country. He had drawn the desired shape of the commissioned grave post on the back of a box of matches. The grave posts can be seen as expressions of sorrow (Hart 1932: 18), yet as aesthetically pleasing tangible and solid bodies, reminiscent of the deceased in shape and by means of the painted design and colour, they also offer solace (Venbrux 2017b). Their proneness as objects of consolation is further due to their link to the deceased's country, like in the past blood had to drop on the grave when people cut their heads when grieving, a blood-like substance flows from the tree onto the land when cut. The treatment of the tree trunks, of a most vital type of eucalypt, resembles the ritual processing of the close relatives of the deceased, including cleansing with smoke and lying down (associated with sleep and death), when painted and subsequently standing up (associated with being alive) around the grave (Venbrux 1995: 193–194). The same day that the grave posts are cut Justin departs to Milikapiti because his eldest sister is dying.

The area where Joan is buried is still taboo (*pukamani*). On 17 September a man returning to Pirlangimpi from taking a couple going hunting and gathering rolls over with his car on the dirt road leading to the burial place. The driver dies later in the day. The next day I meet Justin at the funeral of his eldest sister (in which I act as ritual worker) in Milikapiti. He enquires about the fatal accident. Justin is adamant that they should have waited till after the ceremony for his deceased wife. It was too dangerous, because her father was there now. Joan's father, named Plakwuri (also known as Tipolei), was a 'killerman' (*kwampini*).

In Pirlangimpi a fight had erupted over where the man killed in the accident had to be buried. Two powerful half-brothers from Bathurst Island wanted to have him buried there with their fathers. Initially they persuaded the reluctant widow, but all local close relatives turned against it, including another half-brother and the man's biological father. The latter, painted all in white, hit himself on the head facing the Bathurst Island leader, who walked away in anger from the inquest, stating that if he was buried on Melville Island they would not attend the funeral. Both gestures signalled a breaking of ties within the family over the all-important issue of the place of burial. At stake was the emotional attachment and rights to land, and hence the spirit-promoted well-being, for the patrilineal descendants. Amidst tension the corpse spent a night in jail, locked up, at the local police station in Pirlangimpi. On 20 September the funeral takes place and the man is buried not far from Joan. Justin performs a mourning song as a widower when he arrives at the burial place and walks towards Joan's grave. He walks back and forth in widower style, but mainly at the head end of the grave, where his loin cloth left behind is still attached to a stick. He clears the grass away

from the grave (cf. Spencer 1914: 232, 234). After the burial ceremony his daughter is crying at the grave together with a relative who had not been able to attend Joan's funeral. Justin is in conversation with his wife's spirit in an *ambaru* song. Three days later the funeral of Joan's son-in-law, who never got her daughters promised to him, takes place at Pawularitarra in the southwest of Melville Island. (He is to be buried next to the homicide victim as they have one grandfather in common.) The widow wants Justin's daughters to dance around the coffin as she did. Justin has to dance them towards the grave later on after the burial and composes the accompanying song. He then leaves with his son and daughters, saying to a senior man from Milikapiti: 'you take over now'.

The first of the intermediary rites (*ilaningha*) for Joan is at the place where she was laid in state, under the shade in front of her house, on 25 September. Justin wears a goose-feather ball. He and his daughters are painted up. The participants perform the turtle dance. The sons of Joan's eldest clan brother have to throw up the goose-feather ball three times. Having performed this action, they are considered the new initiands, that is, the clan's new generation to carry on the cultural practices. The ritual workers and the widower end the dancing with their specific performances. The people disperse, but Justin stays behind. He performs a mourning song while standing in front of the house, looking through the louvers of the window on Joan's empty bed.

Midday, 28 September, Justin wearing a loin cloth, face and body painted, and with a goose-feather ball around the neck, walks in a straight line to Joan's house where further intermediary rites are about to start. The ritual workers rake the sand in the shade and remove stones, twigs and so forth, so that none of the dancers will hurt their feet. Many come to this *ilaningha* in which the dreaming of the deceased stands central. It means that the turtle dance is performed by the various categories of bereaved, with the exception of the workers and the widower, while they themselves may have another dreaming. Important in this *ilaningha* 'right through' is an energetic dance in which men throw up dirt with their feet (*ampikatoa*). The insertion of either fast and energetic or slow dances to respectively heat up and 'cool down' (Seligman 1932: 198n1) the emotions in Tiwi mortuary rites is part of a 'regulation of grief' (Jedan, ch. 1 in this volume) that offers consolation. The intermediary rites would go on forever unless one of the chief mourners calls for the 'breaking' of their performance and moving on to the concluding rites or *iloti* (meaning: 'for good'). To this end the rite in question is also carried out at the final destination, crossing in this instance a distance by road of about 80 km.

Justin departs for Milikapiti to keep an eye on the preparations for the final rites. These commence at 5 pm on 30 September. The location is the burial place on the hill where Joan's father and brother have been buried. A new grave has been made with some of her clothes and personal belongings (these items can substitute for a corpse, see Venbrux in press) close to the grave of her father Tipolei with old and weathered posts. At this stage, people have to

stay some 100 metres away from the new grave, marked off with a display of silkscreen printed fabrics in Tiwi design. A large shade covered with coconut palm leaves has been erected alongside the grave. At the grave is a mast with a flag, also of the costly Tiwi design. Justin addresses the grave and performs a mourning song. He sings: 'my wife, your mother, she is glad/because we meet together'. The widower continues, but now singing with his wife's voice: '(dead woman saying:) so you got to grab me tonight' and '(dead woman saying:) you should take your clothes off'.

Then a ritual cleansing with smoke takes place. The bereaved's anger about the death is conventionally directed at the cultural hero Purukupali, who during creation brought death into the world. Justin sings: 'that Purukupali is rubbish/he was telling people we got all to die'.

He proceeds: 'that man Purukupali, he was saying we all die'; 'spirit one, they should go chasing him away'. The ritual workers then go ahead towards the new grave posts lined up between the shade and the newly constructed grave. They call out and chase the spirits of the dead away with sticks. All the participants cry and wail loudly at the posts, holding these carved and painted sculptures. The encounter triggers strong emotions.

As always people are supposed to listen to the lyrics of the songs first and then cry. Justin's elder paternal half-brother sings: '(dead woman saying:) you didn't say hello to me and your brother/and we got a lot of kids', and then he wails. A classificatory mother of the deceased: '(dead woman saying:) my father, I call his name/I am not frightened by the people from Imalu [his country]/but got that lady from you.' The widower's next song is of a more intimate nature: '(dead woman saying) you should take all the clothes off/come straight to me with no clothes'. He cries and tells we will camp and sleep here tonight. Justin proceeds: '(dead woman saying:) he is coming/and he will take me (have sex with me) this night'; '(dead woman saying:) now he is feeling shaking for me/but we got to go in somewhere/because he is feeling shaky (aroused)'; '(dead woman telling her children:) you fellows sleep far away/your father gonna sleep with me/because for three weeks we did not sleep together'.

Time and again the words are followed by expressions of sorrow and crying by the performer. The widower's elder brother sings: '(dead woman saying:) you are the one now/I was looking for you/you are a good man/you got to look after my kids'. Justin points into the distance in the open forest where it looks as if two fires are lighting up. He tells me the spirits of the dead camp there. We feel a cold breeze. The spirit of Joan's father has arrived, Justin says. Justin's paternal half-brother composes the following song: 'those three men (Joan's father and his two brothers: Tipolei, Murantumolia and Marapauma) whisper/we sleep close to them/we got to kill these people with a spear/they tell their wives not to lit the fire/because they (the prospective victims) might get fright'. Justin tells me we can now open up the road where the car accident occurred near Pirlangimpi. It requires a cleansing ritual with smoke to remove the taboo from the place. 'No more spirit there again', he

says. We sleep and the fires burn down. I wake to Justin's singing: '(dead woman telling him:) kill the fire/you and me, we got to sleep in the darkness'; (dead woman saying:) first we got to it once/and then take all the clothes off/and sleep naked'. Before daybreak we hear the birds.

Justin's brothers call out. The one sings about the three brothers again, saying: 'He is fine cheek to kill (hit) her house'; the other one sings they hate his voice calling out, referring to his dreaming, the cockatoo. Justin relates in his song that someone threw a spear; 'all grannies got up and asked: "who did that?"/and some said: "oh, his wife, there was talking about her"'. He alludes to a historical song and at the same time to the first night of the annual yam ritual, the night of sorrow, when the participants lay down and sing about their grief and grievances, voicing trouble and argument. He later pursues it in the lead up to the *iloti*: '(dead woman saying:) maybe our father got to have *ajipa* (the highlight, with polychrome body paint and the most clever and intricate songs, of the yam ritual) today/my husband he is finished/we will be finished after that'. Justin continues: 'she is still underneath the fire (in the ceremonial earth-oven like the yams) at her father's burial place Karumurarimili/a big crowd has come (to listen)/we finish today.'

In a different style of mourning song (*mamanakuni*) a bereaved classificatory mother includes Joan's brother (who died in 1984) buried nearby: '(dead man telling his deceased sister:) sister (waving her), she is here, our mother/she is here with milk, sitting down/she got drink for us'. The *ambaruwi* (in-laws and ritual workers) sing about 'a good hiding' and 'jealousy'. The actual widower sings: '(dead woman saying:) I have a spear from Tipolei/made red in front/I am holding the spear/and say: "my husband and I sleep here!"'

For the people who arrive first in the morning there is another cleansing ritual with smoke. Next the ritualists go to the dancing ground under the shade. One man goes ahead, like he did at Woolawunga beach, calling out all the place names from the deceased's country. Then the *ilaningha*, performed earlier in Pirlangimpi and now carried over in space, is enacted. Joan's dreaming, the turtle, stands central in dance and song. A senior man initiated the first song: 'she is a female turtle with a big name (meaning, she is important)/when she comes out of the sea/she spits water up:/pep-pep-pep' (another way of saying, 'you fellow all come good out, when you are a good dancer'). This accompanied the turtle dance. He continued: 'where the sand bank is, they got that turtle'. The oldest grandson from Tikaklipa, the deceased's grandfather, joined in: 'she is safe at Rangmunarini (near Salt Creek in her country)'; 'she run away/long way'; 'big tide is taking her'; 'big wave (middle of the water)/and she is on top of the wave'. This intermediary rite could go on and on as long as no one called for the final rites, *iloti* (meaning: 'for good'). Justin concluded with marking a classificatory father by making the actions of a butterfly and calling himself a butterfly.

The *iloti* is comprised of dances and songs marking dreamings and the various categories of bereaved (for a detailed discussion, see Venbrux 1995). The spatial dimension came most to the fore in the performances of the

cousins with a common paternal grandparent (*mutuni*), maternal (classificatory) siblings (*paputawi*) and the actual widower (*ambaru*). The first mentioned lost half of their face, which was marked by having it painted only half or in two halves of different colour, and by slapping the face, either by oneself or being hit by others. Tipaklippa's oldest grandson, who also performed the ritual cleansing of Joan's country so that turtles could be caught again, sang: 'I climbed that hill and was on top'; 'big waves at Imalu (the deceased's country) came/and wiped my face'; 'I had a sore face, all the way from my country'; 'that is a boil I had on one side of my face'; 'at Tupulurupi (grandparental burial place) they gave me sorry/the earth was shaking/they said: "sorry for you, you got one side boil"/and they fix my face'. Another one sang: 'I had a sore face, all the way from my country'; 'here at Karangumungumili (Tipolei's grave) my face fell down'. The *paputawi* lose their leg, that is, the deceased sibling, and have the leg marked with paint and hit. The accompanying song to the dance: 'I came down from a bumpy hill/and I broke my leg'. Justin, the widower, combines the marking of his relationship to the deceased and his dreaming: 'I am naughty'; 'a jungle fowl calling out/at that place where I take my wife'; 'kurupu-kurupu (calling out where a lot of mess)/at that place to take her'; 'the bird makes an action with his eye'.

During a break in the dancing people leaned on the colourful carved posts lined up at the grave side of the shade. For Spencer 'there was nothing quite so picturesque' as a ceremony like the one he 'saw on Melville Island' (1914: 239). Goodale (1971: 331) was overcome by the feeling that everything was 'alright' in the world. The mortuary rites are both aesthetically and intellectually challenging, with many subtle clues concerning connections and identifications (Venbrux 2009, 2017b; cf. Turpin and Fabb 2017). As Kertzer (1988: 101) puts it, ritual 'creates an emotional state that makes the message uncontestable because it is framed in such a way as to be seen inherent in the way things are. It represents a picture of the world that is so emotionally compelling that it is beyond debate.' It is not so difficult to imagine that something so beautiful offers some consolation. The *ambaruwi* put Joan's half-sister central in their final dance, the striking family resemblance triggers emotions. Towards the conclusion of the ceremony the workers lift the grave posts from where they stand and place them around the grave.

In paying the ritual workers yellow ochre is mentioned rather than the money that changes hands. The yellow ochre directly refers to Joan's land. The last act is the ritual cleansing of the widower with water. While the water is poured over him and washes off his body paint, Justin sings: 'Big waves from the sea at Imalu (Joan's country) wash my body off/'big waves, and I swim without clothes, and those waves smack me (my private parts)'. A paternal cousin of his has the last word: 'you should take all your clothes off/let your clothes fall off/let everybody see you/what you got!' The attribution of jealousy to the spirits of the dead indirectly indicates that the living are better off. What is more, the deceased has been given all her dues. In the last ritual act most bereaved people, according to Boston and Trezise (1987: 99),

‘wish to do what they feel the dead person would have liked’ as this feels right and gives consolation.

Conclusion

In Tiwi society the land as ‘consolationscape’ is integrated with a person’s worldview, one’s country being a prime source of well-being and identity. In this chapter I followed what happens in terms of grief and solace when a senior Tiwi person dies. As the ritual drama unfolds, the bereaved are offered support and protection, the sharing of pain and grief, and a management of the emotions and timing of the rites on a needs basis. The spirit of the deceased is sent and guided on a spatial trajectory, enabling a gradual transformation of the ties between the living and the dead, towards a spiritual dwelling in the country and hence reinvigorating the ancestral powers that sustain the life of its people. The performances in multiple media, including song, dance and the visual arts, move the bereaved to change perspective and therefore ease the grief.

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