Death, Materiality and Mediation

Material Mediations: People and Things in a World of Movement

Edited by **Birgit Meyer**, Department of Religious Studies and Theology, Utrecht University, and **Maruška Svašek**, School of History and Anthropology, Queens University, Belfast

During the last few years, a lively, interdisciplinary debate has taken place between anthropologists, art historians and scholars of material culture, religion, visual culture and media studies about the dynamics of material production and cultural mediation in an era of intensifying globalization and transnational connectivity. Understanding 'mediation' as a fundamentally material process, this series provides a stimulating platform for ethnographically grounded theoretical debates about the many aspects that constitute relationships between people and things, including political, economic, technological, aesthetic, sensorial and emotional processes.

DEATH, MATERIALITY AND MEDIATION

An Ethnography of Remembrance in Ireland

Barbara Graham

For my father, Andrew Boyd (1921–2011)

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PREFACE

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This book explores contemporary Irish attitudes and beliefs about the dead through examining how diverse forms of material culture can mediate people's relationships with the deceased, the divine and the living. Through an ethnography of communities along both sides of the eastern border area of Ireland, it examines how materiality is central to processes of remembering and the crucial element in the transformations, negotiations and reintegrations that inform ongoing relationships between the living and the dead. With attention to culturally acceptable and unacceptable forms and uses of materiality in the private and public domains, it addresses themes of containment and displacement, separation and reconnection, sentiment and value. The concept of materiality used here includes not just concrete matter and substances but also stories, narratives, ephemera and embodied experience. These various forms of materiality are used as metaphors for the interactions between the living and the dead and as a lens through which the physical, cognitive, emotional and spiritual places of the dead are revealed. The different aspects of this inquiry involve attention also to concepts of inalienability, physicality after death, boundaries, identity and sense of place. The discussion is situated within a historical context of the place of the dead in Ireland.

The research was carried out initially over a period of fifteen months in 2006 and 2007 (and subsequently during five months between 2012 and 2013) in counties Down and Armagh in Northern Ireland and Louth in the Republic of Ireland. The area is bordered on its north, south and western sides by the Mourne, Cooley and Sliabh Gullion mountain ranges. It is cut through at its eastern side by Carlingford Lough, which also serves as the political border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland at this point. The land border extends across the southern parts of Down and Armagh. It is a mix of urban and rural settlement and has a predominately

Catholic population. The region forms a natural geographical and social hinterland where movement of peoples and contacts can be documented back to prehistory.

This area, however, especially around the South Armagh border region, witnessed high levels of unrest and violence during the thirty-year period (1968–98) of ethno-nationalist conflict in Northern Ireland known as the Troubles. During that period, across Northern Ireland, 3,600 people died and 50,000 were injured or maimed (BBC History Archive). The heart of the conflict is generally viewed as the differing aspirations in relation to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. In essence it was a territorial conflict involving different national identities and political affiliations of Protestants (Unionists) and Catholics (Nationalists, Republicans). Unionists sought to remain part of the UK while Nationalists and Republicans aimed for a United Ireland. During the Troubles violence often spilled over into the Republic of Ireland and Britain, and border areas, particularly the South Armagh hinterland, saw high levels of violent deaths. In order to combat the movement of paramilitaries, the British government closed most border roads, and this had an effect on the social and economic lives of people residing in the area.[1] Travel to work, to school, to church and to visit friends and relatives was severely curtailed by the necessity to take long detours, at times through areas that they felt unsafe.[2] There was a feeling of isolation by many families living in this situation and a considerable amount of fear on behalf of border Protestants, who were, and still are, a minority in this area. Despite the violence, however, and the levels of fear and resultant mistrust, not every aspect of life was defined by the political situation, and as in any conflict, not everyone ascribed to polarized political or identity categories.

Since the signing of the peace agreement (the 1998 Good Friday Agreement) Northern Ireland has made considerable advances in addressing previous inequalities in relation to housing, political representation and employment, and there are continuing significant efforts to build cross-community co-operation. The region remains, in many respects, a divided society; there are still isolated acts of violence; a high percentage of public housing is segregated on religious grounds (an estimated 90 per cent in Belfast),[3] and the majority of schools are still divided along religious lines although the integrated schools sector is expanding. In the border area where the research for this study was conducted, a large number of residents have close family connections on both sides of the border. Today many people work, attend schools and churches, shop, make use of health services or regularly socialize across the jurisdictions. Part of the rationale to undertake a cross-border focus was to attest to the common cultural values and practices in relation to the dead that display no significant cultural differences that can be attributed to residence in either state. Whilst acknowledging the large and

important body of work that has been undertaken by scholars in relation to the Irish border,[4] this book moves away from a focus on sectarian divisions to show that, in dealing with the dead, people of different religions (or even those who reject the doctrines of churches) display common attitudes and practices. Within the ethnographies that have been written there are insights on kinship and inheritance that I apply in relation to how items are passed on through generations. My findings on how property is distributed just before or after someone's death can be compared with what Leyton (1970) discovered. The basic principles that governed post-mortem distribution of goods and money – 'genealogical distance, kinship category, birth order, sex, "desserts", need and esteem' (Leyton 1970: 1386) – are discernible in a variety of ways and situations in this study. This hierarchy of categories pertains today to kin and close acquaintances.

The anthropology of death has received surprisingly little attention in relation to Ireland and, arguably, what has been done in Northern Ireland has been coloured by the violent conditions in the north. Much of the work on death, burial and rituals has been undertaken by historians (Corish 1985; Leigh Fry 1999; Tait 2002) and archaeologists; those involved in the historical archaeology of the period from 1600 to the present-day period have concentrated on headstone analysis in terms of artwork styles and spatial distribution, (e.g. Longfield 1947; McCormick 1983; Mythum 2000). In the history of material culture in Ireland over the past five hundred years, most records or studies have concentrated on high-status objects from large houses, estates and churches (Barnard 2005). The sources on artefacts are also concerned mostly with church and ecclesiastical treasures (Barnard 2005: 53–62).

This study builds on a body of recent work on the dead, memory and material culture, most notably by Hallam and Hockey (2001) and Hockey et al. (2010), in what is a growing field of inquiry for anthropologists. This necessarily also includes issues of forgetting and remembering, of which there is an extensive and growing literature in anthropology (Berliner 2005: 197–211). In a critique of how the concept of memory is used, Berliner (2005: 203) argues that the notion of memory has become expanded to the point where it is in danger of becoming conflated with the concept of culture. He (2005: 198) points to the growing uneasiness among anthropologists and historians over its precise meaning (Winter 2000: 13) and its possible conflation with identity or culture (Fabian 1999: 51). Attention to collective, and social, memory (such as in Connerton 1989) has produced an analytical framework for theorizing 'issues of cultural conservation and social continuity' (Berliner 2005: 204).

The analysis of collective events in this ethnography emphasizes individual readings of particular remembrance activities that take place in public

settings. A more appropriate term to describe these events is 'communal', a term that can encompass aspects of mutuality and neighbourhood that are important factors for those who attend, and the usage of which thus circumvents the theoretical connotations and difficulties of representation that adhere to the term 'collective'. In conjunction with this, of course, memory is juxtaposed with forgetting, as memory, of necessity, involves processes of selection. The selection of some memories, at the expense of others, in relation to the keeping (or not) of objects and the dynamics of remembrance is therefore of significance in inquiring into the reasons and rationales of specific practices relating to the materiality of the dead.

This study also introduces new research in relation to Ireland by providing an analysis of the material culture of the dead at the micro level. The foregrounding of materiality as a metaphor for explaining and understanding cultural ideas and practices in this area of inquiry provides a new approach to the subject matter. It adds to theoretical concepts of inalienability (espoused initially by Mauss 1966 [1950] and Weiner 1985) by extending the parameters of inalienability and postulating it as a more fluid concept, acquired through distinct stages, and dependent on cultural rules and norms. It also examines how objects are kept, how they evoke memories, how they are transformed and how they are active in the transformation of relationships and ontological states. The demarcation of boundaries with material objects, a process that is complex and ambiguous, is addressed as illustrative of the boundaries between the living and the dead. This is partly an affirmation of Bloch's (1977: 278–92) argument that ritual discourse and behaviour are the windows into social structure but develops it further to show how the different cognitive systems he posits interact in adjusting and maintaining cultural practices. Issues in relation to containment and boundaries are analysed by examining how the dead are placed in Irish cultural life. The placing of the dead is itself a metaphor for people's sense of place in this area that is scattered with the memorials and reminiscences of the dead that underpin ideas of legitimacy, belonging and identity.

In exploring the intricate connections between humans and materiality, the book builds on the work of Schiffer (1999) and Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who recognized that objects are fundamental in defining humans who have an instinctive need to make concrete the immaterial. Miller (2005: 2) recognized that definitions of humanity have often been 'synonymous with the position taken on the question of materiality'. And King (2010: xv) in a study of material objects and religion in Ireland, reminds us that in the case of images we 'learn to interact with them materially – even shadow images appear on walls, while dreams and ideas are in our heads'. A detailed analysis of the narratives and stories connected to the dead and their materiality also complements Hoskins's (1998) theories on how the stories

of objects are embedded within the stories of people's lives and are crucial in the transmission of history, belief and cultural values. The emphasis on materiality and the importance of human engagement with its diverse manifestations owes much to the recognition of the centrality of the role that materiality plays in social relations (Edwards et al. 2006; Miller 2005). In these collections there is also an acknowledgement of the ways in which materiality is fundamental to processes of self-reflection and how it evokes sensory memories and embodiment (issues that are discussed in chapters 3 and 4).

Materiality – what it is and how useful it is as an analytical concept for anthropologists – has also engendered much recent debate (Ingold 2007: 1–16). An expanded notion of materiality to include ephemera, narratives and embodied experience is similar to Miller's (2005: 4) concept of also including the imaginary and the theoretical. Ingold argues that materiality as a concept diverts our attention from *materials,* something that we should be equally concerned with (2007: 1–2). Yet, as Tilley (2007: 17) and Miller (2007: 23–27) point out, the concept of materiality is needed in order to examine the significance that things have in relation to people and their social relationships. Anthropologists have never neglected materials in analyses but have engaged with the form and substances of what things are made of in order to determine their significance for people (Miller 2007: 24–7) and how they are engaged through the senses. Miller also argues that people 'see the world in terms of immateriality and degrees of materiality' (2007: 25).

In arguing for a wider concept of materiality I am not advocating a materialist perspective wherein everything is reduced to matter and bounded concepts of time. Rather, what is being proposed is that, whilst recognizing that there are phenomena beyond matter and time, outside of the physical world in which we live and engage, we engage with this immateriality through making it material. This can be seen in the graphs and calculations of physicists to explain the workings of the universe or in the embodied experiences of people due to sensory engagements. So, we may not be able to catch a sound and hold it as a tangible object, but as it travels through the air, it changes and bends that medium and has a material effect on our ears as it vibrates. This is perhaps not very far removed from Gibson's (1979: 16; Ingold 2007: 4–5) ideas of how surfaces separate one type of material from another and are the places where interactions occur.

The introduction outlines the themes and direction of the research within the ethnographic and theoretical literature on death, material culture, senses and commemoration. It discusses areas of similarity and difference in theory and ethnography and considers the more local studies in relation to the anthropology of Ireland. Chapter 1 details the methodology and reflects on the experience of researching sensitive issues in familiar surroundings.

Chapter 2 considers how narratives, stories and particular forms of talking in specific death-related contexts illuminate processes of mediation. The role of the senses in triggering emotional and sentimental memories of the dead is discussed in chapter 3 through attention to materiality in both the private and public spheres. The chapter argues that the senses are a primary factor in instigating memory and analyses ambiguous processes and encounters with the materiality of the dead.

The concepts of value and inalienability are reassessed in chapter 4 in relation to objects of the dead. It takes a new and critical look at how boundaries and thresholds are negotiated through material objects and examines the strategies and processes used by people to keep and control former possessions of the dead with particular attention to circulation. The complex shift from private to public remembrance and the often contested public arena and shifting boundaries that are mediated through various forms of materiality are the subject of chapter 5. It discusses the dissimilarities that arise between the public and private in relation to forms of ritual, place and the materiality used. It also shows how private considerations are present in public commemorations and discusses the negotiations that arise between official texts and individual understandings.

Chapter 6 discusses the changes in graveyard memorializing by critically examining the contested nature of some public forms of material remembrance and continues the themes of boundaries and emotions through an examination of 'out of place' forms of material remembrance. Through exploring attitudes and practices surrounding graveside decorations it argues that changes are accommodated within traditional forms and that processes of graveside memorializing can inform about wider changes in society.

The data collected included extensive interviews with individuals, families, groups, clergy, representatives of organizations and those involved in the funerary trade. The fieldwork also involved attendance at collective and individual remembrance events, church services, wakes and funerals. Material is also drawn from numerous hours of conversations with groups and individuals, participation in social events ranging from church social events to dances and yard sales and months spent immersing myself in the lives and daily happenings of people in the area (the appendix details interviews and events).

Notes

1. A comprehensive resource that provides facts and figures about the conflict in Northern Ireland along with a history and a database of writing is Conflict Archive on the Internet (http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/), which is based at the University

of Ulster. The site contains source material on the Troubles, politics and society from 1968 to the present.

2. The Irish Borderlands Project website 'provides a set of resources for exploring the histories, geographies, meanings and experiences of the border' (http://www.irishborderlands.com/index.html). It contains a number of resources in its 'Living with the Border' section in relation to people living along the border during and after the conflict and contains testimonies on how road closures and the Troubles affected people's lives and attitudes. The website arose out of a three-year research project into 'Irish border/lands: cultural geographies of division, interconnection and diversity'. A book based on the research was published in 2013: C. Nash, B. Reid and B.J. Graham, *Partitioned Lives: The Irish Borderlands* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

   Another useful resource is Harvey, B.; A. Kelly, S. McGearty and S. Murray, *The Emerald Curtain: The Social Impact of the Irish Border* Monaghan, Ireland: Triskele Community Training & Development, a report on research carried out to assess the social, cultural and economic impact for communities living along the southern border area. The authors began from the premise that the legacy of the violent conflict had had a 'negative impact on the infrastructure and sustainability of these communities'. The action research assesses the impact of the border on the geographical communities adjacent to or straddling the border and the participation of members of the target group in these communities. The border and the legacy of the conflict are believed to have had a negative impact on the infrastructure and sustainability of these communities. The project aims to identify this impact and work with the communities to develop strategies in both practical and policy terms to address this impact. (2005: 7).

   A considerable body of work specifically examines the lives of people living along the border in relation to the conflict and its aftermath. For recent anthropological studies that analyse contemporary attitudes of Protestant communities in this area, see Donnan (2010) and Donnan and Simpson (2007).

3. Some useful resources on social housing and attitudes to integration include: http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/housing/housing.htm; H. Stockinger, 2015. 'Young people's experiences of integration and segregation in Northern Ireland.' *Research Update*. 99. full text from ARK (Access, Research, Knowledge) Northern Ireland. (Details from the 2015 Young Life and Times (YLT) survey. Retrieved from http://www.ark.ac.uk/publications/updates/update99.pdf 16 May 2016; S. Fenton, 2015. 'Northern Ireland is trying to socially engineer council estates to make Catholics and Protestants live together.' *The New Statesman.* Retrieved 14 May 2015 from: http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/08/northern-ireland-trying-socially-engineer-council-estates-make-catholics-and; Religious Segregation and Allocations in Northern Ireland's Social Housing. 2015. Retrieved from: The Chartered Institute of Housing, http://www.cih.org/news-article/display/vpathDCR/templatedata/cih/news-article/data/NI/Religious_segregation_and_allocations_in_Northern_Irelands_social_housing 16 May 2016.

4. Research in Ireland, historically, tended to emphasize the cohesiveness of communities in the south and divisions in Northern Ireland. Anthropologists work-

ing in Northern Ireland were drawn, understandably, towards an examination of urban sectarian violence on the one hand or what were deemed as more peaceful rural settings on the other (Curtin et al. 1993; Donnan and McFarlane 1986, 1989). In terms of urban ethnography there were different areas of concern for the researchers. Much of the work in Northern Ireland was concerned with the segregated geographies of urban sectarianism. In the south, attention focused on the decline of individual towns and cities and on the connections and exchanges in the social, economic and political spheres between the large urban centres and the rural hinterlands (Wilson and Donnan 2006).

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