



Bones, people and communities:

Tensions between individual and corporate identities in secondary burial ritual

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This review of archaeological and ethnographic literature on secondary burial practices explores how different theoretical understandings of the body inform interpretations of mortuary practice as a forum for negotiations of identity and community among the living. Tension between various scales of identity – personal and corporate – assumed by the deceased are shown to be key elements in many of these negotiations. The materiality of the body can allow participants to explore these tensions through physical manipulations that are part of ritual practice. However, ethnographic examples suggest that multiple interpretations can exist for similar practices, and that secondary burial practices are often mutable and fluid in meaning. While historically contingent, variations in practice can become a means of group identification or differentiation.

Introduction

Seeing bodies, individuals, and communities in secondary burial rituals

Past work in anthropological theory has questioned many “common sense” conceptions, including that of the human body as individual, whole, and un-theorized. This broadening conception of the body has inspired new archaeological interpretations of past experiences, especially in relation to funerary practice (Tarlow 2002, Fowler 2002, 49; Thomas 2002, 33). At the same time, much recent work on the archaeology of death has provided interpretations of funerary ritual as a forum for the assertion and re-negotiation of identity, where personal and community memories could be articulated (Cannon 2002; Chesson 2001b, 4). This paper examines how theoretical approaches to understanding the body have inspired these readings, specifically in the case of secondary burial rituals, where the plasticity and materiality of the human body are themselves central to the ritual process. If a body can have many identities, and can be

perceived alternatively as individual or part of a corporate group, as named or anonymous, then how does the interaction between these scales of identity inform ritual practice? A survey of ethnographic and archaeological literature will focus on the common interpretations of secondary burial rituals in order to explore how the very materiality of the body helps make these rituals powerful forums for the living to negotiate questions of identity.

Defining secondary burial can be difficult since various practices may be encompassed by the term. Following Hertz (2004 [1907]), many authors use it to designate funerary rituals composed of two essential stages between which a length of time elapses, and where the body is moved or altered during both stages. Typically, the flesh is disposed of before the second stage – through exposure, platform burials, temporary burials, cannibalism, incineration, embalming (Hertz 2004 [1907], 201) or mechanical excarnation and disarticulation (Murphy and Mallory 2000). Contact with the body is also

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sometimes maintained in the long term through continued visits to ancestral tombs (Beckett and Robb 2006; Bloch 1982), multiple incinerations (Beck 2005, 154) or the maintenance in circulation of removed body parts (McNeill 2005, 315).

Other forms of secondary burials were not performed as part of a corpus of ritual activity in the Hertzian sense, since exhumation of burials could be done by later people, whether accidentally or intentionally. While such disturbances may not have been planned at the time of the initial interment, they would still be culturally meaningful. At the least, they entail a choice to do something with rediscovered bones rather than leave them in situ; at the most, they are the planned outcome of a process of symbolic violation or veneration (Duncan 2005) of the dead.

Since secondary burials, whether in the Hertzian sense or not, leave almost undistinguishable assemblages behind (Weiss-Krejci 2001, 769), this paper will address both secondary burial that results from intentional later disturbances and secondary burial as a planned aspect of the initial death ritual.

Attitudes and ideas about the body

There are many ways of understanding secondary burial, not only because of the variety of forms that this practice takes in different cultural contexts, but also because of the different theoretical approaches through which anthropologists try to apprehend its meanings. Interpretations range from the very culturally and historically specific (as with Ariès' (1977) study of changing attitudes towards death in Western Europe, from the Middle-Ages to the 20th century) to generalizations about the human psyche (as with Hertz's (2004 [1907]) sociological interpretation of the purposes of all secondary burial rituals, or Stephen's (1998) psychoanalytical approach to all mortuary cannibalism). Nonetheless, because of the nature of these rituals, a number of basic issues are recurrently raised in the literature.

Secondary burial practices involve the manipulation of a dead body. According to the different cultural traditions where they occur,

such manipulations can be performed by anyone from the bereaved themselves (e.g. Conklin 1995) to mortuary specialists (e.g. Watson 1982), and necessitate different levels of active transformation and involvement with the body, from simply moving bones after natural decomposition has occurred (e.g. Ariès 1977, 64) to actively de-fleshing the corpse and boiling its bones clean (e.g. Naji 2005, 178). The physicality inherent in these practices raises questions pertaining to the body and how it is understood and perceived by the people involved in the ritual.

Attitudes about and understandings of the living body are not universal, nor are people's experiences of living in their bodies, because they are culturally mediated (Tarlow 2002; Fowler 2002, 49; Thomas 2002, 33). Furthermore, ideas about what elements constitute a person, and about the relationship between body, soul, and self (or other such permutations) can vary wildly according to cultural context (Fowler 2004, 87), and can play an important role in determining how the dead body and its components are seen and understood.

Distinctions between individual and corporate identities of the dead

One important question stemming from this cultural variability in understanding the body is the issue of the identity of the dead body, which can be perceived as a specific individual or as an anonymous member of a corporate group (see for instance Verdery (1999, 13-23), who explicitly articulates her discussion of corpses in post-socialist Eastern Europe around the "named and famous dead" and the "anonymous dead"). This distinction can be manipulated through burial practices because the individuality of the body can be exaggerated or minimised through the transformations operated on it.

On one end of a spectrum of possibilities is that of extreme anonymity. A dead body need not be understood as an "index [of] the single living individual whose remains are examined" (Tarlow 2002, 23), and bones are not necessarily seen as metonymically symbolic of

the whole person/body (Fowler 2002, 50). Therefore, bone and flesh can be made into material culture that is not interpreted as referring to a person, becoming instead integrated in an “economy of substance” where they are traded, exchanged, and used (Thomas 2002, 42). Human bone has in this way been used as a raw material imbued with special properties (McNeill 2005, 314-5); in Melanesia and Micronesia, long bones have served for making powerful spear points (Stodder 2005, 248; McNeill 2005); in Tibetan tantric traditions, bones have been made into cups or flutes which were filled with inherent vitality (Malville 2005, 191, 197).

Bones can also be seen as belonging to individuals without being attached to specific, known, people. In her discussion of burial practices at Tlatlico in Mexico, Joyce (2002) explains that the skulls found when older burials were accidentally uncovered would likely have been seen as people, because the skull was “the physical site of individuation of the person in Mesoamerica at this time” (Joyce 2002, 23). However, the dead person was still anonymous, and their subsequent re-burial was likely that of a generic “ancestor” of the House (Joyce 2002, 23).

Even the bones of people whose individual identity is known have the potential to become anonymous, because people are not only individuals, but are also part of larger corporate groups such as houses (Joyce 2002; Schiller 2002), demes (Bloch 1982, 211), villages (Ramsden 1991), families religious communities, or others. The intentional erasure of names and means of personal identification, the physical mixing of bones together (Thomas 1988; Bloch 1982, 217), or the stressing of overall homogeneity in funerary treatment (Chesson 2001a, 106) can serve to erase the particularistic aspects of identity, or at least to subsume them within a broader corporate identity.

Finally, the “famous dead” (Verdery 1999) - people known by many, not personally but for what they had done or been in life (such as political figures, royalty, or martyrs) - are themselves a subject of ambiguous

manipulations. Their place in existing narratives make these dead symbolically powerful because they can be related to contemporary issues and identities of the living, and their bodies can be made into a focal point for debating these questions (Verdery 1999, 20). The “anonymous dead” are also symbolically malleable because they can be attached by the living to corporate identity categories that are relevant to the latter (Verdery 1999, 20).

Ethnographic and ethno-historic interpretations of secondary burial practices

Hertzian interpretations of secondary burial as a means of maintaining social cohesion

Hertz's (2004 [1907]) sociological analysis of secondary burials has had an immense influence on later research on the topic and is quoted in almost all the related literature. The premise of his study of Dayak death rituals is that mourning is a social event more than it is a personal emotional process (Hertz 2004 [1907], 197). Secondary burial serves as a rite of passage, marked by two main ceremonies in which society, the dead person's soul and the dead person's body, are all transformed.

The first ceremony involves the temporary disposal of the corpse, allowing the flesh to decay (Hertz 2004 [1907], 198). This “violence” against the body's integrity is seen as a means to effect a transition away from normal social life (Bloch 1992, 4). During the liminal time between the first and second phases, the soul is still somewhat attached to the body and remains on earth, often unhappy, and dangerous for the living who enter a period of mourning and taboos (Hertz 2004 [1907], 197, 199). Eventually, the body is recovered and processed in a final burial ceremony. The “rebounding violence” performed on the body during this second ritual ends the transition phase (Bloch 1992, 4). This allows the soul to enter the community of the dead and frees the living from the taboos of mourning. Death, therefore, is not instantaneous, but a process undergone by the soul and mimicked by what the body is exposed to.

The central point of this Hertzian understanding is the idea that the ritual process can serve to deny individual death, the latter being seen as an affront to the continuity of society (Hertz 2004 [1907], 207). The unequal treatment of individuals according to their relative importance in the living social system (Hertz 2004 [1907], 207), and the normally collective form taken by secondary burial (Hertz 2004[1907], 204) are interpreted as supporting the idea that the motivation of secondary burial rituals is a fundamentally sociological one. Thus tensions between the individual and the corporate are absolutely central to this conception. In this model, secondary burial practices serve to deny the individual aspects of death by effecting transformations on the physical body of the dead in order to allow the social group as a whole to be preserved. The importance of communal treatment of ancestors is also central to Ramsden's (1991) understanding of Huron ossuaries and Bloch and Parry's (1982) understanding of Merina secondary burial. The creation of homogenized post-mortuary spaces is seen as part of a political statement concerning the cohesiveness of the community after death (Ramsden 1991, 31), and the sometimes destructive treatment of bones by denigrating the individual body helps accentuate the continuity of social unity (Bloch and Parry 1982).

For this active downplaying of the individual identity of the dead through manipulation of the body to make sense to participants and observers, it must be performed in terms of a given cultural understanding of the body. There exist multiple ideas about what aspects of the self are permanent, disappear at death, or are slowly eroded over time. A number of studies of secondary burial practice highlight how these conceptions impact understandings of secondary burial (e.g. Kan (1986), in 19th century American Northwest Coast, Watson (1988) in 20th century Southern China, and Bloch (1982, 224-5; 1992, 86) in 20th century Madagascar).

In these frameworks, certain aspects of a person – both the material (skin and flesh) and the immaterial (social identity, emotions) – are

seen as temporary, while others (such as bones and certain relationships, like kinship) are seen as permanent (e.g. Kan (1986, 196)). In some cases, the entire social identity – gender, social status, kinship – is maintained for a time after death (Watson 1988, 8). It is those aspects of the self that transcend death which can remain active and socially meaningful in ongoing relationships with the living.

In some cases, corporate groups such as lineages are one of the aspects that remain socially recognised in death (Bloch 1992, 4). In this context, bodily modifications become more than symbolic transformations of individuals into something else. They are part of the creation of classes of beings, such as “the depersonalized collectivity of ancestors” (Bloch and Parry 1982, 11), that are central to a community's experience and understanding of itself.

Interpretation of secondary burial as a form of political manipulation of the dead

Ideas about body and soul have played an important role in Hertzian interpretation. Yet even in the absence of any such beliefs, secondary burial practices can serve to transform bodies into artefacts; physical things that can be manipulated as symbols. Analyses of secondary burial as a political device bring out how these practices can serve motives that are more specific and personal than the maintenance of a general social structure.

The case of Roman ancestor masks, though it does not involve secondary burial per se, sheds light on ways in which the dead body, or images associated with it, can be made into propaganda tools. In her discussion of Roman imagines, Flower (1996) describes how these wax impressions of politicians' faces were passed down in a family for generations and exposed in and around the house (Flower 1996, 43). They were brought out during elections and funeral processions where the dead and their long term ancestors were lauded (Flower 1996, 92). Such practices influenced popular opinion by making ancestors more illustrious. Masks thus became “the family's public face”, serving to harness this fame and increase the electoral success of descendants (Flower 1996, 65-66).

There is a fascinating tension here between different levels of identity. There is the level of the specific ancestors whose masks are paraded and who are celebrated for their individual accomplishments. Yet these ancestors are also incorporated in the common identity of the family group. The descendants, by their participation in the same corporate group as their ancestors, are somehow made to seem as sharing some of their qualities. Even though personal identity is subsumed as part of a corporate family group, it is individual action which is at the source of the corporate prestige. This back and forth between a specific individual and a corporate group, in which the body is used as a visual reinforcement, can be manipulated by the living in order to make a powerful political statement.

The propagandist potential of bodies is also discussed by Trout (2003) in his work on early Christian relics. The “bivalency of presence and absence” (Trout 2003, 525) of relics gave them a kind of power because they were physically available and could be manipulated and were visible in people’s daily lives, yet were simultaneously imbued with another, immaterial, existence. In the case of Christian relics, this bivalency implies presence in a metaphysically different world, but this concept could also apply to bones which are at once physically present in the contemporary world, and in the past, as objects belonging to specific histories. In this sense, bivalency would lend symbolic potency to the bones and enhance their ability to reinforce narratives about the present. As Verdery (1999, 27) notes about political exhumations, re-burials and desecrations in post-socialist states: “bodies have the advantage of concreteness that nonetheless transcends time, making past immediately present”.

Archaeological interpretations of secondary burial rituals

An added level of complexity in archaeological interpretation stems from the need to determine if the assemblage was indeed the result of secondary burial, how many bodies were included, and other similar points.

Secondary burials are usually recognised on the basis of bodies being in a disarticulated position. The bones having been re-organised (e.g. Chesson 2001a, 104) or clumped together in a bundle (either for transport or in preparation for interment) (Shaffer 2005, 150) can help to confirm that this displacement is not the result of non-human taphonomic processes. Also suggestive are certain surface modifications such as burn marks on bones where there is no evidence of pyre (Walthall 1999), or cut marks indicative of excarnation or disarticulation of the body (Murphy and Mallory 2000, 393). Finally, the incompleteness of a skeleton – provided the bones missing are not the most fragile (Duday 2006, 47) – may indicate that certain bones were removed and circulated.

In the case of communal secondary burials, reconstructing what activities took place is particularly relevant. This would allow one to see whether, as in 20th century Madagascar, the repeated handling of the bones of the dead served to fragment them into homogenized and de-individualised state of ancestorhood (Bloch 1982, 217-8), or whether, as in Bronze Age Babh edh-Dhra, individual bodies were clearly demarcated through the positioning of bones (Chesson 2001a, 104). It would also show whether most of the community were buried together or whether only specific individuals were singled out. Such questions are difficult to resolve and are subject to ongoing research. As Beckett and Robb (2006, 69) point out, even with a slow rate of bone destruction in common burials like British Neolithic megaliths, only a minute percentage of all bones initially interred would remain in the long term. These questions are, however, important to resolve because they can help give a clearer sense of what secondary burial practices were like in that particular context, and how/if they changed over time.

A number of works have drawn on ethnographically attested relationships between living people and their ancestors in order to interpret archaeologically identified cases of secondary burial. Concepts of ancestorhood are used to better imagine the relationships of living humans with the people they buried near them (e.g. Parker Pearson and Ramilisonina 1998;

Joyce 2002; Porter 2002). Porter (2002) examines this question critically, proposing that the conjoint practice of secondary burial and bone removal is a strong suggestion that ancestor veneration practices were important in the society being studied (10).

Many of the elements of ritual practice that have been the focus of ethnographic interest – the social environment within which the ritual took place, the participants, the emotions overtly expressed, and so on – remain invisible archaeologically. The meaning of many of these practices can be extremely difficult to make out; veneration and violation can both involve exactly the same bodily manipulations for utterly different purposes (Duncan 2005). Indeed, boiled and excarnated bones could as easily result from exo-cannibalism of slain enemies, endo-cannibalism of a loved relative, or preparation of bones for long distance transport to their final burial place (Stodder 2005). Nonetheless, many archaeological works have transcended these limitations in novel ways, notably by turning to an analysis of mortuary space and place (see volume published by Aragon *et al.* (2002) for the theoretical importance of spatial analysis in mortuary archaeology) to better elucidate important aspects of past practice. The combination of ethnographic research on secondary burial with this interest in space has led to archaeological interpretations wherein burials are increasingly seen as one stage of a possibly multi-stage event. As such, contemporaneous mortuary diversity within the archaeological record is not only, or even necessarily, explained in terms of social stratification (Hutchinson and Aragon 2002, 35; Shaffer 2005, 153). Furthermore, the use of space has often been re-thought since different sites could be part of a ritual landscape in which elements of the full cycle took place (Hutchinson and Aragon 2002, 35).

Special places and secondary burial practices:

A way to cope with practical constraints limiting burial practices

The most commonly encountered archaeological interpretations of secondary burial focus on people's relationship with places,

especially with those places that were the designated sites of death ritual. Indeed, many interpretations cite practical problems to explain instances of secondary burial where the corpse could not, for whatever reason, be processed properly at the time of death: death in winter when frozen ground made burials impossible (Jacobs 1995, 394-5); lack of space in a cemetery, sanitary reasons (a desire to let flesh decay before handling the bones, especially in the case of house burials (Andrews and Bello 2006, 17)); and, most commonly, a death away from the community burial ground are all invoked.

The idea of “special place disposal” being used by nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples who carried the bones of the dead back with them has been used to explain secondary burials in areas ranging from Mesolithic North America (Walthall 1999, 4), Archaic Mississippi Basin (Charles and Buikstra 1983), Scythian period burials in Tuva (Murphy and Mallory 2000, 394), to the Bronze Age Levant (Chesson 2001a). Regional (Charles and Buikstra 1983, 132) and temporal (Byrd and Monahan 1995, 265) differences in the prevalence of secondary burial within an area have been taken as indicative of differences in the degree of mobility of the inhabitants. In cases where the population was only partly mobile, certain population patterns (e.g. more secondary burials of young adults than of children or elderly people) have been interpreted as signs that the more mobile people, being at greater risk of dying away from camp, received secondary burials more frequently (Andrews and Bello 2006, 23).

Yet such interpretations are incomplete because there is no reason to assume that mobile people would necessarily choose to use special burial places, as evidenced by Woodburn's (1982) research on burial practices in four African hunter-gatherer societies. In all four cases that he discussed, death was followed by a local interment of the body and abandonment of the camp. Why, then, are the same spaces used recurrently by some people, and what makes this important enough to justify carrying a body over long distances?

Enforcing corporate ownership of lands through mortuary practice

Secondary burial is sometimes explained by proposing that people needed to bring the dead back to specific places at least in part to reinforce their own corporate relationship to this place. In terms of the relationship between the individual and corporate identities of the dead, this view is relatively similar to those pertaining to the political manipulation of the dead; bodies become used, in a sense, as symbols of the larger-scale group to which they belong and become physical reminders of long-term corporate presence in a given area. Secondary burial here is only a means of getting the body to its proper place.

Morris (1991, 151) explains the difference between hunter-gatherer societies that practice special place burials and those that do not in terms of their differing economic systems. Contrary to the societies referred to by Woodburn (1982), many hunter-gatherer societies used a “delayed-return” system in which subsistence depends on investment in specific resources ahead of time, and where specific social obligations and rights could be passed on from one generation to the next. In such cases, the affirmation of a common inherited relationship with the land could be bolstered by the maintenance of conspicuous mortuary structures (Morris 1991, reviewing the Saxe-Goldstein hypothesis). A few archaeologists use this concept when explaining bone repatriation (e.g. Charles and Buikstra 1983, 117-20; Walthal 1999, 5). Charles and Buikstra (1983), working on Archaic sites in the Mississippi area, support their interpretation by noting that these cemeteries were often very conspicuously placed near long-term occupation camps (129).

The relationship with space, however, could also be mediated, not through the dead as visible markers of corporate identity, but through an ongoing relationship with the ancestors themselves. In early Greece, having dead ancestors buried somewhere created an immutable, legally recognized bond with the land that stemmed from the need to care for the dead; a duty that only descendants could

accomplish (Fustel de Coulanges 1979 [1864], 62). Conversely, relationship to ancestors could take precedence over that with space itself to the point where any land that held ancestors could be sacralised. If people had to move, secondary burial could be motivated by a desire to bring ancestors along in order to maintain a long term relationship with them. This is attested in a wide range of contexts, from forcible departure in war-time to planned movement of bones as part of a normal cycle of periodic village movements. Such movements have been performed by: Serbs leaving Sarajevo in the 1990s (Verdery 1999, 109); Chinese immigrants to North America bringing with them ancestral bones (Greenwood 2005); 17th century Nanticoke people who were moving villages (Shaffer 2005, 141); families leaving apartment compounds in Classic Teotihuacan (Manzanilla 2002, 62); and by communities in Natufian period Levant (Byrd and Monahan 1995).

Creating sites for community gatherings

Another interpretation of special-place burials evocative of a Hertzian understanding of the ritual is that they served to bring people together through ritual participation in a common location. The repatriation of bones to such cemeteries would form a ritual event, the repetition of which could help form community ties (Jacobs 1995, 397-8; Walthal 1999, 23; Chesson 2001a, 110; Porter 2002, 6; see also Kan (1986) for an ethnographic example). Furthermore, secondary burial practices may have been one means through which different levels of community could be articulated together. In the early sedentary communities of the Neolithic Levant, Kuijt (2001) found that certain practices occurred among many different communities. Most bodies were buried in houses, but certain skulls were removed and kept in either the house itself or in public spaces in the city (Kuijt 2001, 89). Repetitive patterns in the placement of the skulls created a commonality between homes and public space (Kuijt 2001, 89), and a certain level of homogeneity was maintained between different individuals. In this way, the skulls of specific

people were removed while maintaining a level of corporate similarity between members of the community.

One important concept brought forth in Kuijt's article, that of social memory (Kuijt 2001, 81-2), helps give meaning to explain the interaction of places (where bodies were repeatedly brought and processed), of the bodies themselves, and of the oral histories repeatedly told about these objects. Through the repetition of such rituals, individual people could be recognised while "the idealization of links between the living, the deceased, and the collective ancestors" (Kuijt 2001, 89) created a sense of community that transcended individual death.

Discussion

The ways of thinking about secondary burial rituals outlined thus far all help to bring out important aspects of the practice in specific contexts. Because of the great variability of practices that exist, however, interpretations are intensely bound to specific contexts and are inadequate for others. Indeed, the very concept of "secondary burial" has been critiqued on the grounds that:

A term that does not allow researchers to distinguish between secondary rites in Indonesia (Hertz 1960 [1907]) and the relocation of bones into European charnel houses is bound to confuse any cross-cultural discussion of mortuary practices. Additionally there is no commonly applied method to evaluate whether disarticulated remains result from human sacrifice, cannibalism, body processing, or reburial, and only a few studies have addressed the problem [...]

(Weiss-Krejci 2005, 156)

After all, between placement of bones in ossuaries by families in a small community as part of the normal mourning process, yearly visits to powerful ancestral places and destruction of royal tombs during a revolution, the motivations of the participants, their experience of the event, and the event's social impact (either in the short or long term) have little in common. What is more, even outwardly similar practices, such as the use of ossuaries,

can be explained in very different terms by the participants. Explanations range from the desire to have their dead "buried with their Relations" (Shaffer 2005, 149) to a desire to "conserve land" (O'Rourke 2007, 390).

Ethnographic research has also found that participant explanations can be surprisingly diverse even within a single community where practice was relatively homogenous. Through her fieldwork with Wari elders who had performed mortuary cannibalism in their youth, Conklin (1995, 75-6) discovered that while participants described their conduct of this ritual as important because it had been the greatest possible expression of respect for the dead, they did not necessarily have an articulated and unified explanation of why this was so.

This is also shown with particular clarity in O'Rourke's (2007) report on her fieldwork in a rural Greek village where secondary burial had long been performed. Traditionally, this involved the eventual removal of bodies from individual tombs and their transfer to an ossuary where no marks of the personal identities of the deceased were allowed. This transfer was followed by a break in relationships between the mourners and the specific person who had died.

The practice has changed rapidly within the past 50 years with increased memorialisation of the dead as individuals and increased maintenance of living-dead relationships even after secondary burial (O'Rourke 2007, 387). This change was surprising since many participants still describe the universality of the decomposition of the body and its return to the same earth as all other bodies, and the minimization of inter-personal and class differences in death, as central and laudable features of traditional practice (O'Rourke 2007, 391). After inquiring about how people explained this change, O'Rourke (2007) found herself "surprised by the range and intensity of responses, not only about why practice was changing but [even] about what was currently happening after disinterment" (388, emphasis added).

This conjunction of often intense and sincere feelings about the importance of rituals

with a lack of consensus about what they meant, and sometimes even about what specific form they take, seems surprising. Yet this flexibility makes it more possible to adapt ritual practices to a range of circumstances. It also creates potential for debate and for tensions between the different levels of identity that could be commemorated.

The concept of secondary burial is also problematic because activities that were similar in their purpose could leave utterly different traces in the archaeological record. Thus the twofold ceremonial structure described by Hertz can also occur without the body actually needing to be physically transformed (Hertz 2004 [1907], 203). Similarly, it is possible for the living to memorialise the dead and to have ceremonies that unite the community without involving the bodies of the dead in any way.

For instance, Kan's (1986) discussion of the 19th century Tlingit potlatch focuses on two ceremonies necessary for the proper disposal of the dead. These ceremonies seem to be a good fit for a Hertzian understanding of secondary burial; although the body was incinerated during a wake ceremony which occurred soon after death, the soul could not fully integrate life in the village of the dead until the commemorative potlatch (Kan 1986, 195-6). Respect and care for the dead were understood by participants as the central point of this second ceremony which was described as "the finishing of the dead body" (Kan 1986, 193). During the course of the ceremony, the body was moved into a new container by the affines of the dead person's clan (Kan 1986, 196) who were thanked with gifts. As well as affirming community ties, the potlatch could serve as a forum for prestige building, an endeavour understood as a way of honouring the lineage's ancestors (Kan 1986, 201).

In other contexts, mortuary potlatches can occur without secondary burial of any kind being necessary. Simeone's (1991) ethnography of Northern Athapaskan memorial potlatches brings out, again, the importance of re-affirming affinal-consanguine social networks through gift-giving and shared sorrow for the dead person, and highlights that tensions between collective

commemoration and affirmations of personal/family status are also present (166-7). Yet the memory of the deceased, not the body, form the focus of these activities. The most mutable practices, in this example, are those concerning what is done to the body itself. The continuation of relationship between dead and living, and the re-negotiation/re-assertions of relationships among the living, can be expressed just as vehemently in rituals that do not include secondary burial.

Conclusion

These examples highlight how tensions between individual and corporate identities can be expressed without any recourse to bodily modifications, and how participants can value a specific mortuary practice as a sign of love and respect for the dead without having or needing a shared notion of possible complex symbolic underpinnings to their gestures. Both of these examples concur with the surprising degree of mutability that death rituals in general seem to express, as well as the high emotional value they hold for many people (Kroeber 1927, 314).

This very mutability and fluidity of secondary mortuary ritual make them an interesting topic for study. If meanings were not inherent in ritual practice, they can be attributed post facto when a practice gained visibility through juxtaposition with other possible ways of doing things. In situations of cultural contact with new groups, or between people within a group, such practices could be invested with importance. Speaking of statements made by a group of people about the death rituals of the Sepik (who had traditionally practiced mortuary cannibalism), Knüsel and Outram (2006) state that "[t]he apparent relativism of [statements about inherent cultural difference [...], although lacking in obvious contempt and fear, provides the basis upon which difference could be accentuated to justify actions at another time or under circumstances" (253).

Indeed, secondary burial rituals may be made into arguments in a discourse about difference and sameness – about identity. This is true, as has been explored within a group of

people who practise secondary burial together. But it is also true in cases where secondary burial practices are juxtaposed with different mortuary treatments. For instance, in 19th and 20th century Europe the practice of removing bones to ossuaries was rarely seen in English cemeteries, although it had been common in the 13th century (Goody and Poppi 1994, 159). This disappearance had been gradual with the change occurring for various reasons, yet as a difference in the practice of secondary burial began to emerge between England and continental Europe, it became subject to discourse about other differences between the people in these places. An intense polemic concerning mortuary remains was raised during the reformation, wherein attitudes towards the treatment of bodily remains was fashioned into a means of differentiation between the newly-formed Catholic and Protestant groups (Goody and Poppi 1994, 161). Napoleonic reforms of burial practices involved laws mandating prompt exhumations from public cemeteries and re-burial in ossuaries (Goody and Poppi 1994, 163). By enforcing secondary burial as the norm throughout much of continental Europe, these laws would have created an added incentive towards differentiation.

Treatment of, and attitudes about the body, as well as relationships with the dead, are varied. In certain cases, secondary burial practices – or any burial practices – can be made salient by contrast with other funerary traditions. Questions about the meaning of ritual may become more important under these circumstances. In such cases, there can be a conflation of identity between a group and its practice in such a way that discourse about mortuary practice and about treatment of the body become discourses about the people

practising these rituals; discourse about differences in ritual practice can be made to refer to differences between the practitioners. Since ideas about life and death, and about the body and how to treat, it may be (although they are not necessarily so) emotionally resonant for many people, such an emotional charge can be brought to bear upon whatever other social issues are being debated through the ritual. Using the longer term perspective provided by archaeology and ethno-history, periods of change or coalescence in mortuary practice would constitute thought provoking topics for further study.

Thus secondary burial practices provide a forum for community formation and for discussing ancestors, selves, and relationships. There can be tensions between different scales of identity when it comes to how the person's memory and their body are represented throughout the ritual. Such tensions may be played with as part of negotiations between the living; individual death can be minimized as a way to emphasize the continuity of social order, but it can also be exaggerated as part of political discourse in which the individual person becomes a symbol. Yet in all of this, secondary burial ritual is not fundamentally different from other forms of ritual. Variations in practice seem, often, to be historically contingent, and serve as community forums to reflect, debate, or reinforce personal and corporate identities.

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