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Abstract

The title of this article, “Bridging the Gap”, is intended to suggest the inevitable gulf between the living and the dead. The disjunction, imposed by death on an established and significant relationship, is discussed as a threat to an individual’s sense of self-definition and recognition. The article is illustrated with original photo-ethnographic material that draws on the little-documented practices of memorialisation on the remote islands of Kiribati, as well other examples from around the world. Underpinning this article is the belief that being able to remember lies at the heart of our survival, our humanity, and our individual identity. It is argued that self-definition is closely tied to memory and the maintenance of memories is of vital concern to social groups and individuals. The fear of losing the memory of significant events and people gives rise to strategies implicating enduring tangible materials in their maintenance. It is proposed that the extent to which strategies are developed to maintain a connection with the dead is in direct relationship to the significance of the deceased to a personal or public sense of self. Mnemonics of memorialisation hold a profound and significant role in the development and execution of these strategies.

Keywords: self-definition, mnemonics, memorialisation, burial

Bridging the gap

This article begins and ends on the remote islands in the Republic of Kiribati, a chain of coral atolls straddling the equator approximately half-way between Hawaii and Australia.





Figures 1, 2. On the atoll of Tabiteua North is the mwaneaba (meeting house) of Atanikarawa in the village of Buota.

Inside this meeting house is a small cask hung from the roof beams, which holds the bones of Kourabi, reputed to have been a great warrior and a "giant". Approximately every seven years, his bones are washed. The time to wash these bones is signalled through a dream of a *unimwane* (an old man or elder) of the village. Preparations begin, new mats are made for the *mwaneaba,* food is collected for feasting, and practising for the dancing begins. Finally, in the early hours of morning, the bones are carried to the ocean side and washed. During the following day the bones are dried, oiled, and re-hung in the *mwaneaba* until the next time a dream brings the village together for this ritual.



Figure 3. Cask containing Kourabi's bones.

The washing of Kourabi's bones is an important event for the whole community; the remote village is known for the significance of this event. The village and the individuals involved enjoy a status and sense of self-definition from the ritual. The washing of the bones establishes a point of difference and, therefore, of self-recognition and self-definition.

Through an association with the bones of Kourabi, the villagers consciously or unconsciously, inevitably and unavoidably, map out their orientation towards their existence. Wilhelm Dilthey suggested, "Thus we learn to comprehend the mind-constructed world as a system of interactions or as an inter-relationship contained in its enduring creations."[1] It could be argued that a development of an awareness of self is revealed and maintained in the concrete expressions of our experiences.

The social differentiation established through the ritual practice of washing Kourabi's bones provides a sense of individual difference and social recognition for those involved. Generating a point of socially acceptable difference is not easy in Kiribati. Just as the atolls are physically similar, so are the patterns of social life that are maintained on each island. Traditional skills, practices, and values are common to all living generations. There are no dramatic changes in

buildings, dress, or forms of social behaviour, and the I-Kiribati language is spoken throughout the islands with only minor differences.

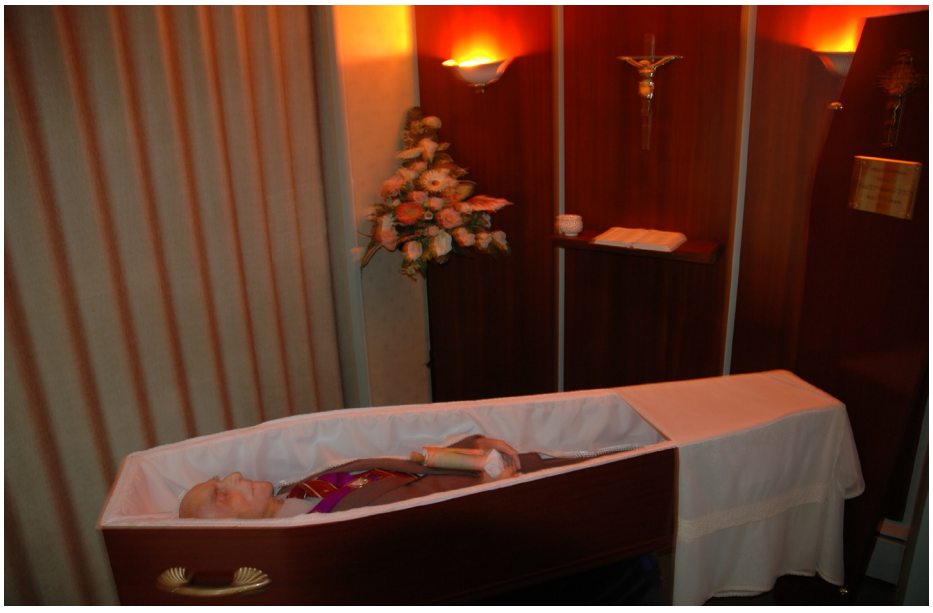
The dynamics and structure of village life ensure transparency of activities and behaviour. Traditional knowledge systems and strategies for maintaining cultural patterns promote a homogenous and stable culture. The ritual associated with Kourabi assumes great significance, dynamically affecting the day-to-day existence of life on the atoll with its rarity and intensity.

Although Kourabi's bones were hung in the *mwaneaba* to honour and show respect for his role in life and to mourn his death, I suggest that the sustained attendance to the preservation of his memory has now shifted, and the enthusiasm of its maintenance is in direct relation to the sense of identity the village derives from it. To lose the memories of this chief, Kourabi, would be to lose an essential and vital aspect of community. In embracing the mnemonic potential of the bones and establishing the ritual practice of their cleaning, an inter-generational continuity of Kourabi's story and his relation to the village is ensured, as is a special sense of community.

The utilitarian aspect of the ritual also preserves the casket. The oiling and cleaning of the bones preserves the skeleton and, to an extent, the meeting-house itself as it is refurbished before hosting visitors for the associated celebrations. These activities also encourage the maintenance of traditional skills such as string and thatch-making and the aural histories embedded in the ancient chants that accompany the dances.

Turning our attention from Kiribati. When my father died in the United Kingdom, I was in New Zealand. I flew back to pack up his house and "things" and to attend the funeral. "Things" were much more to do with my mother, who had died some years earlier. I had never strongly associated my father with any particular object. Was there a mnemonic that would connect me to a lifetime of memories?

Figures 4, 5. Father's funeral.





When I went to the funeral home to see him laid out in a cask it seemed natural for me, as a photographer, to reach for my camera and make one last image of him. I was sad for him not being a part of life anymore, but he was approaching 90, with the accompanying ailments of age. I realised the devastation I was feeling was for me—not him. His death had dramatically changed an aspect of my sense of self. All my life I had been a "son"—a significant definition—now I felt orphaned.

I interred his ashes in a beautiful field near the crematorium—a place that I may or may not ever re-visit. I also made a photograph of this site. The part of me that was his son is sustained, as much as it can be, by the pictures I have. As long as his memory remains, so too does that of belonging as a son.

Pierre Bourdieu has noted that a search for "self" is a primary function in human life. It is logical then to see as important the protection of those elements that constitute a preferred sense of self. The loss associated with the death of a person of significance in our lives is closely aligned to a change in self-definition. I argue that the protection of the memory after death is also a protection against a loss of self. The more significant the individual or group was in life, then logically, the greater the attendance to the protection of their memory in death.

It is in the special function of being able to remember, to note consistencies, and to recall them that lies at the core of our survival and our humanity, as well as our individual identity. It is not surprising that the nature of memory is of vital concern to individual and group alike. Memory, no more than a trace of our experiences, a little understood pulse across the synapses of the brain, is a slippery and fragile thing, constantly open to deduction and addition, but on which rests the whole constructed edifice of human social life.

Graves and shrines, and their associated rituals, are significant globally and historically in establishing and maintaining connections that bridge the gap between the living and the dead.

South of Coober Pedy in Australia, a roadside “shrine” reflects an individualised mourning for the family who died in a car crash at this site.

Figure 6, 7. Roadside shrines.



On the other side of the world in a quiet rural Wiltshire lane, the memory of Michelle Bryne is maintained with flowers and a valentine card.



Objects are a central agency in any interaction between experience, social structure, and individual agency. When the selection of objects is considered in this way, groups and individuals consciously or unconsciously reveal the interplay of experiences with their social structure which orientates the very nature of what can be considered of value.



Figure 8. This image is of a cemetery in Wairarapa, and those buried in this part are predominantly of European descent.





Figure 9. In another area the graves are mainly of Māori and Pacific Island families.

Figure 10. Yet another section of the graveyard is devoted to local people who died in World War II.

The involvement with objects, their spatial organisation and social coherence, may be a part of self-conscious strategies or as un-self-conscious accretions, but will inevitably make concrete and visible the synthesis of experience and social background. The view of self, gained in these expressions, is at once both personal and social.

"It is not fanciful to consider that as my objects have a reality through me, I am then the voice of my objects. As I constitute my objects, so too do they constitute me. If these objects are considered to arise in part from the historical relationship of all other people and things, then I am as much a product of the world's history as it is of me. … Expressions of experience equally well 'direct' who we are as 'represent' who we are. There is a circularity in the way in which we think the thoughts we think and the nature of those thoughts."[2]

To return to Kiribati

In Kiribati graves are traditionally functional markers made from the readily available coral. The perimeter is marked with slabs, while the central area is covered with small sharp pieces of coral stone.

Figures 11, 12. Traditional Kiribati graves.





The graves are on family land and often close to the living area. Although the population is virtually one hundred percent Christian (divided between the Catholic and Protestant faiths) the spirit of the ancestors is still strongly felt—the separation between the living and the dead is not clear-cut. June Knox-Mawer writes:

… as night falls, the old beliefs take hold. The darkness is full of the spirits of the dead, no longer the … familiar inhabitants of ancestral skulls that were derided

and destroyed by nineteenth century Europeans … but vindictive beings with a grudge to avenge against the living.[3]

Te anti whisper, create drafts, touch you, leave their smell behind, and in the extreme lay hands on you; their presence is tangible and commonly accepted. Knox-Mawer concludes:

A respect of the unseen is perhaps not surprising in islands so bare, so remote, so close to the elementals of life. It is this isolation that has kept change at bay to a degree found in few other places.[4]

Ancient practices (such as the use of specific materials, style, and construction of the graves and their sites) prevail on the outer islands of Kiribati. These long-established patterns reflect the traditional cultural hegemony of consistency in approach to social existence—each grave, site, and material used is accepted symbolically and socially. No family or individual "stands above" another and self-definition is defined in terms of community belonging rather than an individual identity. The objects themselves are the means through which cultural practices are handed from one generation to the other.

On urbanised and overcrowded South Tarawa, ancient practices of remembering the dead have not escaped the transformative power of new technologies. In particular, the availability of electricity on South Tarawa has led to dramatic changes in the expression of love for the deceased and the perpetuation of their memory. Small lockable shelters are now frequently built around the graves in order to provide security and protection for decorations of imported plastic flowers, toys, and photographs.

Figure 13. Mary's grave.





Figure 14. Mary died just before her first birthday. Her parents will often buy toys for her while out shopping and place them on her grave.





Figures 15, 16. William, a trainee pilot, died in a car crash. His parents built an extension to their house for the cask and will often spend time at night sitting on the couch talking to him.

Figures 17, 18. Electricity provides opportunities for decoration not previously available.





Figures 19, 20. Highly personalised graves of loved ones.





Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey suggest that:
The highly personalised graves of loved ones have been transformed into spaces in which the "living" deceased reside and receive visitors and gifts … (and are) … animated as a body of a person in that it is washed, cared for, gazed at, dressed with flowers, offered drinks, and surrounded by household and garden ornaments.[5]

On the anniversary of a death families gather together in ritual remembrance:
… by which the living are conjoined with the dead, and by which humans renew their historical connections to the past and present …[6]

In Kiribati there is resistance to change, as voiced by the *unimwane* of one island:
If we do use them (imported materials) then we will lose our customs, values, identity, and our way of life, particularly our upbringing as I-Kiribati. This will all be wiped away by these new materials.[7]

On other atolls, I-Kiribati (the people of Kiribati) indicated their desire to demonstrate their love of departed family members by the construction of ornate graves but are constrained by social pressures for conformity. The contemporary memorials found on South Tarawa parallel aspects of the international movement to personalise sites of graves and fatal accidents. In a community of formality and strong tradition the "new" graves provide a liberating quality, an opportunity for the informal and personal.

Unlike the examples from the U.K., New Zealand, and Australia, the South Tarawa memorials are not at the sites of death but are built on family land and in close proximity to the house. One participant, who worked for a local radio station and lived in a very urbanised area in a house built from imported materials, asked if I would like to see his father's bones. "Of course," I replied. To my surprise he took me upstairs and pulled out an old leather case from a cupboard drawer. From the case he took a cloth bundle and carefully unwrapped it on the bed, revealing his father's skeleton.



Figures 21, 22. Bones, particularly the skull, maintain strong connections with loved ones.



He announced, "… that when I feel lonely, I sit down with my father's skull and this big bone [femur] and have a long talk".[8] In a very direct and personal way, his father was still with him and this important sense of self was maintained.

Beyond the flashing lights and plastic glitter of recently imported materials reside ancient beliefs of ancestral spirits. Bones and plastic are drawn into function as mnemonic objects, bridging the gap to ensure ancestors are not lost and the spirit world maintains its hold on the living.

Endnotes

All original recordings, transcriptions, and translations are held by the author.

[1]W. Dilthey (ed. Rickman H.P.), *Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 176.
[2]T. Whincup, *Mirrors & Windows, Object Attachment Within the Site of the Domestic Living Room* (Massey University, NZ: Master of Arts Dissertation, 1994) 181.
[3]P. Carmichael and J. Knox-Mawer, *A World of Islands* (London: Collins, 1968), 40.
[4]Ibid.
[5]E. Hallam and J. Hockey, *Death, Memory and Material Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 88.
[6]Ibid.
[7]Original recording of *unimwane* (village elders) at Atanikarawa mwaneaba, Buota village, Tabiteuea North (2009).
[8]Original recording at Betio, South Tarawa (2009).

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Biographical note

Associate Professor Tony Whincup is Head of the School of Visual and Material Culture in the College of Creative Arts, Massey University, New Zealand. He is a photographer whose research interests are primarily concerned with role of material culture in self-definition and inter-generational continuity. His work emerges at the interface of the disciplines of photography and anthropology. He uses galleries, publications, and conferences as sites to explore and communicate his ethnographies. The primary focus for his photo-ethnographic practice has been Kiribati where his research has examined the role of dance, canoes, daily artifacts and the meeting house. In 2008, he was awarded the Kiribati Order of

Merit for services to the country. His most recent book, Bwai ni Kiribati, *Artefacts of Experience,* focuses on an overview of the material culture of Kiribati. Currently his work has been concerned with the effects of climate change upon traditional I-Kiribati social practices.

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