CHAPTER TWO

Solidarity in Shared Loss: Death-related Observances among the Martu of the Western Desert

Myrna Tonkinson

Introduction

In this chapter, I provide an account of contemporary mortuary practices among the Martu of the Western Desert of Western Australia, and evaluate the impact of these practices on Martu society. I argue that funerals, despite taking an enormous toll on the affected individuals, families and communities, serve to affirm cultural identity and vitality. Through participation in mortuary ceremonies, Martu exercise a degree of agency and control in circumstances of change that can be traumatic, asserting continuities with their cultural roots.

Across Australia, funerals are prominent features of Aboriginal life, and popularly assumed to be a long-standing tradition. It is important, however, to distinguish funerals, in their current form, from the variety of mortuary rituals that have been widely reported as features of Australian Aboriginal societies. Among Western Desert Aboriginal people like the Martu, funerals have demonstrably grown in size and importance, and their form is continuously being elaborated. Today they are the most prominent events in the Martu calendar, rivalled only by male initiation ceremonies in scale and significance, but unlike the latter, occur many times each year.

I suggest that Martu funerals demonstrate cultural dynamism, innovation and creativity, that they preserve cultural continuity, and permit a degree of autonomy and control seldom possible in other spheres of their lives. Also noteworthy is how the salience of relationships, both distant and close, is sharply demonstrated among Martu
in their responses to deaths. While this chapter focuses on people who predominantly live in the Pilbara region of north Western Australia, other chapters in this volume similarly attest to the contemporary significance of funerals among Indigenous people in other regions of Australia.

Over the last few decades, along with numerous transformations in almost every aspect of their society, the Martu experience of, and response to, deaths have changed extensively. Most obvious is the dramatic rise in the incidence of death, especially what epidemiologists label ‘premature preventable death’.\textsuperscript{1} Deaths occur with bewildering frequency, and the mortuary activities that follow a death loom large for Martu families and communities and greatly impinge upon their everyday life. These events involve large numbers of people, and entail enormous amounts of time, money and effort – not to mention the debilitating recurrence of grief (see Glaskin, this volume). The frequency of death and the enormity of the demands – economic, emotional and other – that funerals place on communities have serious consequences for Martu individuals, their families, and their communities.

\textbf{Past practice}

In the desert, prior to European intrusion, people lived in small, dispersed groups in which deaths occurred infrequently. After a death, the body was disposed of almost immediately: either buried or placed in a tree out of the reach of dogs. With the minimum of ceremony, the necessary tasks were performed by those in the deceased’s generational grouping who were present or in the vicinity and quickly contactable.\textsuperscript{2}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} Infant mortality has declined, but the deaths of young and middle-aged people from diabetes and its complications, renal failure, stroke, heart disease, accidents and homicide have increased.
\item \textsuperscript{2} In the case of an infant’s or small child’s death, no further ceremony would take place.
\end{itemize}
(Where practicable, closest kin, especially of the opposite generation grouping, would not participate in the burial). Co-residents would then vacate the area to separate themselves from the spirit, which was, and is, thought to be reluctant to depart from loved ones and country.\(^3\) At a later stage, two or more years on, the bereaved, along with all the wider kin, would gather at the burial site for a more extensive mortuary ceremony (\emph{laka}) to dispatch the spirit to its original home. The appropriate persons would exhume and clean the bones, and conduct an inquest and reburial; this final burial would be in the deceased’s ancestral country. At that time, the taboos imposed on the deceased’s spouse(s), parents and other close relatives would usually be ceremonially lifted, and remarriage authorized (Tonkinson 1991 [1978], 103–105).

As the Martu population adopted a sedentary existence at missions and reserves, such as Jigalong and Wiluna, they held simple funerals, with the assistance of missionaries and other staff members resident in the communities (see R. Tonkinson 1991 [1978], 160–166). These simple events combined some Christian and some Martu elements. They were held soon after the death and attended only by local people. Coffins were not available, and bodies were usually placed in hessian bags or wrapped in blankets or cloth, and buried in cemeteries established by the missionaries. Following tradition, certain close relatives did not attend the funeral, but waited for the active participants to return and signal that the burial had taken place.\(^4\) The \emph{laka} (often called

\(^3\) This pattern is similar to that described by Woodburn (1982) for the hunter-gatherers of southern Africa among whom he did research.

\(^4\) There is some variability in the composition of this group, but they are principally from the opposite generation grouping from the deceased and include parents, actual and classificatory, aunts, uncles; some others with strong ties of affection may also choose to stay away from the funeral. See R. Tonkinson (1991,72–78), for an explanation of sections and other social categories among Martu, including these
‘reburial’ in English, though no longer involving actual exhumation and reburial of bones) was still the major mortuary ritual, conducted some time after the death, often while people were gathered for their annual ‘big meetings’. While some of these features are retained in mortuary observances today, there are notable changes.

**Death and the responses of the living**

The chronological sequence of identifiable ceremonial stages following a death in contemporary Martu society is the announcement, the funeral, and the reburial. These stages and the events associated with them are not of equal duration, intensity or significance, but each has a public dimension in which people beyond the bereaved family are expected to participate.

**The announcement**

When a death occurs, there are clear protocols for informing relatives and others. Telephone and fax messages are sent to affected individuals and communities. Regardless of who witnesses or receives the initial news of a death, an announcement is made publicly and people respond in this public space (outdoors to allow people in avoidance relationships to be present). Word is quickly circulated that there is ‘bad news’. People gather, sit on the ground and the convener, an adult male belonging to the deceased’s generational grouping, usually a ‘brother-in-law’ or ‘grandson’ says something like ‘X has lost his mother’ or, pointing to a particular person ‘this girl lost her uncle’. Immediately, the person singled out will wail loudly, and is joined by others. People used to hit or cut themselves, usually on the head with stones or sharp objects, with others trying to restrain them and to minimize the severity of their injuries.

‘merged alternate generation levels’ which are crucial to both ritual and mundane interaction among the Martu.
Nowadays, however, while it still occurs, self-injury by the bereaved is not common practice (cf. Musharbash, this volume). Persons who might be unsure of whose loss is salient, are usually led by the hand to the bereaved to pay their respects by touching and weeping.

Touch is significant in expressing shared grief. Close kin of the deceased hug or place hands on one another, and those offering condolences also touch or hold the bereaved as they cry together. Outside the communal conveying of condolences, people seeing a bereaved person for the first time after a death express their sympathy by hugging, sitting or standing close enough to touch hands at a minimum, and wailing with them; often, virtually no words are spoken (see Babidge, Musharbash, this volume). While most people express their grief with palpable distress, wailing loudly, some of this behaviour is perfunctory, presumably for those who are not emotionally close to the one who has died. After the appropriate amount of weeping with those who are present, close bereaved will be led away, still wailing, and everyone disperses. The close kin of the deceased will immediately endeavour to be with other family members, often travelling great distances to do so.

The expression of grief

In any society, the display of grief is context-specific. Martu might give the appearance of being impassive or stoic in the face of bereavement when they are at a hospital or otherwise separated from their support network, but grief is an experience to be shared, and in the appropriate circumstances is freely and passionately expressed. While bereaved people may feel sad, angry or have other emotions in private, it is in public, in the company of kin, that the outpouring of sorrow occurs.

Post-mortem practices/taboos
In announcing the death, the name of the deceased is not stated, and it ceases to be used, requiring others with the same, or similar, name to be called *nyaparu* (what’s his/her name). Similar-sounding words are also replaced with *nyaparu*, for example, ‘key’ following the death of a man named Keith, or ‘Nyaparu town’ for Newman which is too similar to Norman to be uttered. The replacement of ‘four’ with a word from another Aboriginal language, because its sound was a component of a dead person’s name, is another example of how the avoidance of a deceased person’s name is handled (see Musharbash, this volume).

The house in which the deceased most recently resided, whether or not they died there, is vacated immediately. Their possessions are burned, dumped or given to distant kin. The necessary tasks are the responsibility of people from the deceased’s generational level grouping. A ceremony may be held wherein the close bereaved and the house in which the deceased lived would be smoked, but this is not routinely done. Relatives who live near the deceased, or in whose houses the deceased spent a lot of time, may also decide to move some distance away, within or outside the community. With the construction of permanent houses in recent decades, the practice of abandoning dwellings altogether presents difficulties, and is now often modified. Bereaved families will settle in a different house from that in which the deceased lived, sometimes exchanging houses with distantly related persons, a few return, eventually, to their pre-bereavement homes.

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5 There are so many people whose names cannot be spoken that the use of ‘nyaparu’ can result in confusion. An innovation, in the last decade or so is the use of initials, a practice that has become widespread, though it entails its own complications. Sometimes people joke that they should just call everyone *nyaparu*. 
Close relatives of the deceased, especially women, cut their hair short. Some of the men shave their heads. The hair is used later to make string that will be presented to parents or other senior relatives at the reburial ceremony (see Glowczewski 1983). From the time of the death, close relatives, especially parents, spouses and children of the deceased, are expected to gather in the same place, to stay quiet and avoid travel. If employed they cease working, at least until the funeral has taken place, but often for many weeks or months afterwards as well. They stop eating certain native meats, notably marlu (plains kangaroo), and, if a spouse has died, they must abstain from sexual activity and must not remarry until after reburial ceremony takes place and taboos are lifted.

The Funeral

The funeral is the mortuary ritual most elaborate and most obviously influenced by Christianity and ‘Western’ traditions.

Funerals as Major Rituals

Funerals have become increasingly elaborate as well as frequent, and are now major rituals at which attendance is de rigueur for all extended family members, and indeed virtually the entire Martu population, which is dispersed across a number of locations. If people are sick or unable to arrange transportation, they seek the bereaved family’s endorsement of their inability to attend, and send fax messages of condolence. People who are in Perth or Port Hedland for dialysis often insist on returning for funerals, sometimes at risk to their own health. Some Martu evince considerable distress when they cannot be released from hospital or prison to attend a funeral, or do not have sufficient funds to pay for petrol or an airfare (see McCoy, this volume). Patients have
sometimes absconded from hospital to get to a funeral, and people solicit widely among their relatives and associates to raise funds for travel.

For the individual, there is both desire and obligation to go to funerals, even when the deceased is not a close relative. Failure to attend may result in criticism such as ‘they should show respect’ (see Babidge, this volume). Absence can evoke suspicion of ill-will towards the deceased or their family, with arguments and fights sometimes ensuing. A pattern of non-attendance at funerals can lead to questioning the person’s loyalty to Martu community and traditions. However, the overwhelming motivation among Martu to attend funerals appears to be strong positive sentiment; a desire to show respect for the deceased and their family, to give support to the bereaved, and to enact community solidarity. Because funerals are regular, well-attended gatherings they have become occasions like the ‘big meetings’ at which much religious and quotidian business was traditionally conducted. On these occasions, Martu take care of other matters that require community action.

In addition to enabling aggrieved relatives of the deceased to demand explanations, attribute blame and mete out punishment (discussed below), funerals provide opportunities for dispute settlement, for the conduct of other rituals such as ‘reburial’, for punishment of those blamed for previous deaths, and for planning other events such as initiation ceremonies. Also, though rarely nowadays, the public conclusion of arranged marriages with the ‘handing over’ of the betrothed woman/girl to her husband, or, more commonly, the endorsement of unions already entered into by young people, may occur after a funeral.

*Arranging funerals*
Close relatives from the deceased’s merged same generation level, namely siblings, spouses, cousins, siblings-in-law; and grandparents and grandchildren, (including classificatory as well as actual kin), are the major players in arranging and conducting funerals. Decision-making and supervision are the prerogative of the more senior relatives, while younger adults carry out many of the physical tasks.

Soon after a death, the appropriate relatives confer regarding the date and place of the funeral. This is not always a simple matter since the wishes of family members may be in conflict over the burial site, and many scheduling and logistic considerations are required. The place of interment takes into consideration the relationship of the deceased to both living and dead family members. Although there is still the notion that the body of the deceased should be buried in its ‘home place,’ deciding where this is can be difficult; many people have spent substantial time in different places, and are tied by relationship and sentiment to people in multiple locations. It is often stated that people should be buried where their parents and/or children have been buried, and where there are appropriate persons to look after their graves. However, conflict can arise when, for example, the deceased’s parents are buried in one place and a spouse or offspring somewhere else. In a recent case, the children and some ‘mothers’ of a deceased middle-aged man wanted his funeral in one community; his widow (not the mother of the children) was from another community, and there was speculation that he might be buried there. Since theirs was a ‘wrong’ marriage and she was of the opposite generation level, the widow left the decision to others. A few of the man’s close classificatory siblings prevailed and, two weeks after his death, it was decided he would be interred in a third community. His ‘siblings’ claimed that he had expressed this as his

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6 See Note 4, above.
‘last wish’, which was accepted only grudgingly by some, and there was a public airing of disagreement after the funeral (which took place five weeks after his death).

A significant change is the greatly lengthened time between death and interment. The Martu population is dispersed widely over several locations, and, because deaths occur so frequently, and so many people wish to attend funerals, it is rare for the funeral to occur fewer than three weeks after a death; some are delayed six weeks or more. Greater access to transport, refrigeration, and cash all contribute to this. Since many people own vehicles and some communities have buses or trucks, large numbers of Martu travel to funerals, sometimes hundreds of kilometres away. I observed one funeral that was attended by people who travelled to Jigalong from as far away as Carnarvon, Bidyadanga, and Perth; there were more than 80 vehicles, at the cemetery. In addition to road vehicles, both scheduled and charter airlines are sometimes used for travel to funerals, although cost limits these options. These modes of transportation permit many more people to attend funerals, but time must be allowed for travel over great distances, and at any given time, several funerals are likely to be pending. Refrigeration allows corpses to be kept for weeks to await burial. Communities and regional organizations help subsidize the cost of funerals, including transport. Since most Martu adults are either employed as CDEP workers, or rely on pensions or benefits, cash is limited and funerals are usually scheduled to take place during ‘pay/pension week’ rather than the leaner week in the fortnight when income from supporting parents and other benefits are received.7

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7 The Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) pools unemployment benefits and pays them to Indigenous communities which then employ recipients, usually for 20 hours per week to carry out tasks such as rubbish removal, firewood collection, etc. Payments are also made for participation in some
Funeral Ceremonies

On the day of the funeral, the closest bereaved kin gather and sit quietly on the ground outside the house (sometimes called the ‘sorry camp’) until it is time for the funeral to begin. They are supported by others, and people who have not previously cried with them may approach to do so. Prominent among this gathering are family members, mostly of the opposite generation - parents and others in their generation, plus some in the dead person’s generation who are emotionally closest (kaangu). They are passive participants who do not attend any service and do not witness the interment of the body. They remain gathered in a central place until the mass of attendees return from the cemetery. Sometimes close relatives depart from protocol and attend the service and interment; some Martu express disapproval of this.

A service is held in church or at the graveside, led by a man related to the deceased as ‘brother’, ‘brother-in-law’ or ‘husband’ and/or one or more Christian pastor(s). The body is in a closed coffin. At some point in the proceedings, most people walk past and touch or lean over the coffin and wail. The service may include rather feeble singing of hymns accompanied by guitar music, and a sermon, during which most people are wailing so loudly that the pastor can barely be heard; the service seems

community activities. In Martu communities within the Western Desert regional administrative area, funerals constitute a legitimate ‘activity’ for the payment of CDEP.

In contrast to the situation described by Tony Redmond (this volume), among the Martu tension between denominations is not apparent. There are adherents of Assemblies of God, Baptist and Seventh Day Adventist churches and at funerals it is not uncommon for pastors from two or all of these to lead and take part in the service. In my experience much of what is said by the pastor is drowned out by the loud wailing of the mourners anyway.
to hold little interest for most Martu. It is at the graveside that they have more clearly
defined roles, and are more attentive and active.

The rituals and other observances that follow death emphasize the connection
between the deceased and their kin group. The nature of the kin relationship places
different sorts of obligations on the living; it determines whether individuals are active
or passive participants, and what roles they will assume. Mature women and men
among the deceased’s relatives, particularly affines of the same generation grouping –
‘spouses’ and brothers/sisters-in-law – take the most prominent roles at the graveside,
(these kin also deal with the deceased’s belongings and so on). They guide and direct
mourners; brothers, brothers-in-law and grandsons dig the grave, carry the coffin, lower
it into the grave, and refill the grave after mourners have filed past and thrown dirt or
flowers in. Sisters, sisters-in-law and ‘wives’ smooth over the grave after it has been
filled, and place plastic flowers on the mound.

After the interment, a contingent of relatives of the deceased’s generation
grouping return in single file, carrying small tree branches, to a central meeting ground
where chief mourners, kaangu, are waiting, lying on the ground. Those in the returning
group make whooping noises and throw the branches onto the bodies of the waiting
mourners; this indicates that the burial has taken place. More wailing occurs; then, the
crowd gradually disperses.

Soon after this, everyone usually assembles for a large public meeting, at which
attribution of blame to particular persons for causing, or not preventing, the death, and
appropriate punishment - the prerogative of certain categories of kin – constitute a
settling of scores. Thus, people may go away with a ‘straight story’, and satisfaction
that those culpable have been punished. In one such case, after the funeral of a young
man, those deemed culpable (including his wife, some of her family, and the men who were with him at the time of his death), were berated ('growled') vigorously, and beaten. The process was conducted in an orderly fashion; aggrieved people hit the accused with varying degrees of severity over the back and legs with clubs (some only tapped them lightly, but at least two people received blows requiring stitches). In cases where culpability is seen as commission of an act (for example a murder, or driving the vehicle in an accident), the accused, if a man, is usually speared in the thigh(s). Sometimes this punishment is administered at a later stage, such as after the perpetrator has been released from prison.\footnote{This practice raises questions about the application of customary law in cases where Australian law also applies. E.g. see, e.g. Finnane (2001) and the New South Wales Law Reform Commission (2000), Chapter Three, ‘Sentencing: Aboriginal offenders.’}

**Contemporary mortuary practices**

Martu funerals today display a number of syncretic features. Although few Martu are practising Christians, funerals generally follow a Christian form, with a service conducted in church and/or at the graveside by a pastor, then interment according to Christian tradition and Australian law. Nevertheless, these funerals are significantly shaped by Martu tradition. There are roles that must be performed by certain categories of kin, even if the role has its origin in non-Martu practice (for example, only members of the deceased’s own generation level grouping would officiate in the church and graveside ceremonies). Before and after the service, Martu practices are carried out, of which few outsiders are even aware.

Among the more recently adopted practices that accord with Australian law and Christian tradition, are the use of coffins, deep graves, the singing of hymns and pastors officiating. Some Christian/Western practices have been adopted by Martu in recent
times with growing enthusiasm. These include: sending faxes or cards to be read out at
the funeral; placing flowers (usually artificial), and sometimes small ornaments, in and
on the grave; a eulogy, and sometimes an invitation to anyone present to speak as well;
wearing special funeral clothes; placement of grave markers, including a few cases in
which a small plaque or large tombstone has been commissioned and transported to the
burial site.

It is noteworthy that families go to great lengths to ensure that the younger
‘orphans’ (*kampurta*), the deceased’s own children and those of their siblings, wear
clothes that mark them as key mourners. They usually don white tops and black skirts or
trousers, but other colours may be worn to distinguish them at the funeral. Other people
also select special clothes for funerals; especially among younger women, it is common
when selecting clothes to identify black or white items they will keep ‘for funeral’, safe
in the knowledge that there is bound to be one soon.

Another growing trend at funerals is the distribution of printed pamphlets with
biographical information and listing the close bereaved, and, in at least one case I know
of, a photograph of the deceased, a practice that is still disapproved of by many Martu.10

‘Reburial’ (*Laka*)

*Laka* (‘reburial’, also called ‘clearing’) remains important as the final mortuary; its
performance contrasts in several ways with that of the funeral. Some time after a
funeral, usually at least a year, but often longer, close relatives from the appropriate

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10 Photographs of the deceased can cause distress and used to be strictly banned from being shown;
however, this taboo has now been relaxed. In the initial period following a death, most close family
members tend to avoid looking at photographs of their dead relative, but many Martu now seek out
photos, especially of long-dead family members, and show them to younger people who may not have
met the person or have forgotten what they looked like (see Macdonald 2003, 236).
category start planning this ceremony. This ritual has changed over the course of settlement; it has been surpassed in scale by the burial ceremony (funeral, *pin*). The *laka* no longer lasts several days, and does not include exhumation and reburial, though it is often referred to as such. It includes many elements of past ritual performance, as well as new elements. The giving of blankets is now an essential feature of *laka*; close family purchase blankets, often stockpiling them over several months. The practice of giving and receiving blankets is an essential part of Martu mortuary ceremonies, both funerals and reburials. The practice began when rations were distributed to Aboriginal people at depots and missions, such as Jigalong, in the early and mid-decades of the twentieth century. Blankets were highly valued components of the rations, and became objects of ceremonial exchange. The practice has come to require more blankets, preferably large, colourful and soft ones, which cost between 60 and 200 Australian dollars, rather than the army-style blankets used in the past.

When the date is set, the organizers ensure that there will be able-bodied younger men of the deceased’s own generation to hunt and bring back meat. Certain women of the deceased’s own generation-level grouping clean the grave, and have this responsibility from the time of the funeral. A hunting trip is organized, involving both men and women. Meanwhile, bereaved relatives gather in an outdoor area; many older women remove their tops and rub their upper bodies with red ochre; they sit quietly and wait. There is an air of anticipation as some look out for the returning hunting party. The hunters signal their return by making whooping noises and waving small branches as they file in; they present *marlu* (plains kangaroo), which the close bereaved, mostly of the opposite generation grouping from the deceased, but including spouse(s), have been prohibited from eating since the death. The mourners wail, and some resist, as small pieces of the meat are brought to their noses or rubbed across their lips to remove the 

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taboo on eating; they are then given portions of meat to take away. Other goods (store-bought items such as tinned foods and bread) are also presented and the hunters are given blankets.

Once this ceremony is completed, bereaved kin can resume their normal lives. Consequently, the *laka* is still of immense importance to Martu. However, this ceremony appears to have been scaled back while the funeral has been expanded. Perhaps because there is no equivalent observance in the wider Australian society, reburial seems not to be influenced by Christian practices, and is also not subject to the assistance or involvement of external agencies and persons. As there is no body to dispose of, there is more flexibility in scheduling a *laka* than a funeral. Some Martu express concern that, because there are often problems getting the right people together to perform the *laka*, sometimes there is undue delay – at least in the opinion of some widows, and sometimes it happens too early. Interestingly, one way to get the right people together for a *laka* is to arrange to hold it right after a funeral.

**The Social Impact of Funerals**

Martu sometimes comment on changes to mortuary practices, especially funerals, mostly in approving tones. Some people note that having access to vehicles makes it possible for them to attend funerals, or they express relief that they can send a fax when unable to attend. Martu do express concern about the frequency of deaths and funerals, but from the perspective of outsiders who work among Martu, this is seen as resulting in enormous problems; non-Martu often comment on the ‘trouble’ funerals cause.

Funerals, and other death-related practices among the Martu entail many costs to individuals, families and communities. Some of the most significant ones demonstrate the impact of current mortuary observances.
Funerals are so frequent that in most fortnights, there is at least one affecting people in several communities. Consequently, schedules must be coordinated to prevent clashes. Funerals seldom take place less than a fortnight after a death and, since the communities are spread over great distances, much time is spent in travel. Every time there is a death, several people stop work in mourning, and many more take time off to attend the funeral. Relatives will journey to be with family as soon as they have news of the death, and this can mean that people are away from their home communities for weeks on end. Thus, there can be no certainty regarding availability of workers, and routine is continually disrupted.

People cannot make firm commitments, and long-term planning is difficult. Non-Martu employers and managers find this frustrating, but perhaps because unemployment is so high and CDEP payments usually continue while people are involved in funerals, I have found no evidence of Martu being perturbed about missing work or by others’ absence. (It is the prospect of missing a funeral that people express concern over.) Not only employment but all aspects of community life, including Martu involvement in the governance of their communities, are compromised by absences at funerals, especially of elected or appointed leaders. Meetings and decisions are frequently postponed, or not made at all, because of such absences.

The local school is closed for the day whenever there is a funeral, and sometimes children do not return for days. Furthermore, when people travel for funerals, they usually take their school-aged children with them and stay away for days or even weeks. This pattern contributes to the problem of school absenteeism that affects all Martu communities. For example, in a community school with an enrolment of 85
children, on the Monday following a Saturday funeral, there were eight children present, and on the Tuesday, still only 20. This pattern results in many days of absence in a year for most children.

The only certainty about funerals is that there will be many in any year. A staff member in one community argued that funerals are the most disruptive force there because they are so frequent, yet unpredictable. He explained that with the annual big meetings for initiation, people, including staff, can plan well ahead, but with funerals the lead-time may be short, the number of absentees considerable and the duration of their absence variable. From the Martu perspective, funerals take precedence over virtually all other matters. These discrepant points of view make for strains between the Martu and many of the people with whom they must deal.

Health and Well-Being of the Living

Medical staff members in Martu communities have pointed out, and some Martu individuals agree, that people may put their own health at risk in order to attend funerals. One Martu woman remarked: ‘everyday funeral, funeral, it makes you get sick yourself’. When announcing funerals, those arranging them sometimes suggest that people whose health makes travel difficult should send messages of condolence instead.

Since every deceased person is known to everyone and is bound to be related to many, these events are not usually matters about which most people can be detached. The emotional toll is palpable, and the fact that a high proportion of deaths are of young people is a source of particular anguish for Martu. At one funeral, a middle-aged man who spoke said it was distressing to lose young people: ‘They should be burying us.’

Almost every kin group endures several losses in any given year or two: in a recent 30 month period, one extended family experienced the deaths of three siblings,
the spouse of one of those three, the spouse of a surviving sibling, and the teenaged child of a surviving spouse. Another family lost a son and a son-in-law in the same year; both were in their 20s, and both died tragically. These are not isolated cases, just two of many (see Glaskin, this volume). The high rates of premature preventable deaths from vehicle accidents, disease, homicide and suicide far exceed the Australian incidence rates. Bearing in mind that, almost invariably, these families are also dealing with chronically ill members who perhaps have to live away from home for treatment, and other social problems, the impact is huge. Acute sadness is experienced and expressed by people of all ages, and, as there is little or no time for recovery between losses, the emotional energy expended so regularly must engender chronic stress in some.

Money

Conducting and attending funerals entail many expenses. The storage of the corpse, purchase of the coffin and of some blankets, and some other expenses, are borne by communities through their ‘chuck-in’ funds. Some communities encourage attendance by subsidising the cost of fuel, and sometimes the host community bears the cost of fuel for all visitors’ vehicles upon departure. Sometimes, communities pay for prisoners to be flown to the funerals of close family members, allowing them and their relatives to see one another, albeit under the watchful eye of their accompanying guards. Regret is usually expressed when imprisoned family members cannot attend a funeral (see McCoy, this volume).

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12 This is money deducted from fortnightly wages and benefits by the community administrators and pooled for expenditure of this type.
Individuals spend money for bus or airfares, and on fuel and food for the road. The deceased’s family members purchase blankets, artificial flowers and sometimes ornaments for the grave. Increasingly, people buy clothes to wear to funerals. Occasionally, Martu complain about having to contribute money for funeral-related costs.

**Beneficial aspects of funerals**

Notwithstanding the burdens of funerals, I submit that many strengths of Martu society are displayed during such crises. The abundant social solidarity that exists among them is well demonstrated in funerals. There are obligations that certain categories of kin must fulfil, and their presence is required, but beyond this, there is considerable sentiment that impels people to attend funerals, even when doing so entails hardship. One of the certainties in the often-precarious life of Martu is that relationships of solidarity and support will swing into action when a death occurs. Support for the bereaved and attendance at funerals are among their highest priorities. 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.

The internal Martu universe is where people have security and autonomy. Although some have moved outside that universe, almost all remain socially on the periphery of greater Australia. Martu who live or spend periods of time in places where they constitute a small minority, such as Perth or Northam, participate in public events like fairs, free concerts, fireworks displays, and use services such as shopping, transport, medical and other facilities, but socially their world comprises other Martu almost entirely. In some places like Newman and Nullagine, their numbers are large
enough to constitute distinct enclaves; but, even where the numbers are small and they are scattered, these networks are active. The satellite communities lack a ritual base or adequate kin ties, so the dying and their families try to ensure that the death occurs in the home community. When this is not possible, the body is sent ‘home’ for the funeral, thus bringing family members back to the major Martu centres where they can renew their relationships with significant people and places.

Mobility is highly valued by Martu, and funerals provide legitimate reasons for movement. The desire to travel is powerful, and funerals help to satisfy it. Some people seem to grasp the opportunity when many vehicles are going to a funeral. Importantly, this is travel undertaken within the Martu universe, to visit family and to return to places that are familiar and often the object of homesickness (gujilpa).

Funerals (and reburial ceremonies) also provide opportunities for people to assert their personal identity as Martu and their position in their social universe. The high incidence of death allows most adults, at some point, to be major decision makers and actors in mortuary rituals – for example, deciding where and when, and directing people, speaking at the funeral, supervising the laka, distributing and receiving blankets and other goods. Funerals are occasions for the exercise of agency that strengthens the Martu propensity for situational leadership.

Mortuary rituals are almost completely under Martu control and provide opportunities for them to develop, hone and demonstrate skills. The planning and logistics of mortuary ceremonies, often involving hundreds of people, are locally organized and executed with very little overt direction, and a minimum of apparent fuss, albeit with occasional conflict, as mentioned earlier (and see Redmond, this volume). People know their roles and responsibilities and carry them out. Non-Martu may be
approached for assistance, but control is in Martu hands. Local or visiting pastors are expected to conduct funeral services, but most aspects of the ceremonies, and the scheduling of events, are controlled by Martu. The process is assisted by the fact that particular categories of kin have prescribed duties to perform, but planning, cooperation, initiative and other abilities are amply demonstrated. It is a poignant irony that funerals – occasioned by the deaths of Martu people – are also powerful expressions of the vitality of Martu.

*Exchange Relationships*

The salience of exchange relationships is one aspect of Martu tradition that is reinforced in funeral and reburial ceremonies. Among the Martu, exchange is a prominent feature of mortuary ceremonies, and the differentiation of two social groups, based on their members’ relationships to the deceased, is emphasized. The events around death highlight exchange taken by affines. The performance of active roles and the distribution of gifts at funerals and reburial ceremonies constitute an enactment of exchange relations, and reciprocity, particularly between affines who are prominent actors in these ceremonies. This example is contrary to the conclusion Bloch and Parry (1985:32–38) draw, that funerary rituals in many societies suggest the abolition of exchange relations between groups, or overcome the differentiation on which exchange is based.

*Why Funerals are Important*

From the perspective of most non-Martu who work with Martu, funerals have become too large, too demanding on limited resources and too frequent. Indeed, some claim they are counterproductive, and contribute to social dysfunction. Clearly the Martu disagree. In the face of increasing frequency, and the high costs, materially, emotionally
and otherwise, why do Martu persist in going to such lengths to hold, and attend, funerals?

I suggest two reasons that I consider critical. First, in a world of immense uncertainty and insecurity, family remains a reliable constant. Confronted by apparently inescapable and staggering rates of illness and death, as well as poverty and other hardships, the Martu find in one another, and in the conduct of funerals, affirmation of their identity and continuity with their past. The family, not just the nuclear family but also the wider network of kin, though far from perfect and beset by problems, provides love and support, familiarity, constancy and acceptance. When people die, they leave many bereft relatives who wish to honour their memory; these experiences touch every family. So, there is a desire for solidarity on the part of those who have suffered the loss, and a desire to show solidarity on the part of others who, almost invariably, can empathize with that experience.

Secondly, funerals allow Martu opportunities to gather in large numbers and take care of many kinds of business, in a domain in which they can be autonomous and innovative. R. Tonkinson (1988) has written about the logistical, organisational and planning skills displayed by Martu in rituals and ‘big meetings’. Many such skills are evident in the arrangement and conduct of funerals. Martu can act, plan and implement outside the control and scrutiny of whitefellas; they are accountable only to other Martu. Within the Martu population, there may be contestation and even conflict about when, where and how funerals should take place, but the decisions are unquestionably Martu prerogative.

R. Tonkinson (1978) has also pointed out the historically sharp dichotomy drawn by Martu between ‘Martu business’ and ‘whitefella business’. Over many decades,
Martu have been willing to leave the details of ‘whitefella’ business to non-Martu, and this has meant heavy dependence on the knowledge and skills of those who carry out ‘whitefella’ tasks. The fact that Martu are not in a position to take full charge of their mundane affairs presents a challenge both to the Martu and to non-Martu working for and with them since it compromises the ‘self-management’ or autonomy they ostensibly gained over three decades ago.

The way Martu manage funerals might provide a model for understanding how effective syncretism might provide a basis for change that would enable them to have greater mastery of their own affairs and develop the skills that will ensure greater self-management. The conduct of funerals is an example of how Martu have acquired new knowledge, modified traditional practices to incorporate new elements, made innovative responses to changed circumstances, drawn on ‘whitefella’ skills and resources, and can exert control over all these factors. Perhaps more significantly, in the space of a couple of decades, the Martu have turned funerals into major events that accomplish far more than the disposal of the dead and the public expression of grief. Martu funerals are settings for the display of solidarity, the assertion of identity and autonomy, and the expression of a determination to retain their distinctiveness in the face of ever-more-encroaching external forces over which they have little or no control. The prominence Martu accord to funerals could be read as attesting to the value of Martu lives and a display of ‘reactive agency’ whereby they can point to the depredations of colonization in which personal loss is emphasized as a symbol of societal loss.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{13} I thank Michael Jackson for suggesting this possible reading of the immense importance that Martu and other Indigenous Australians place on funerals.
In the face of chronic loss that can fairly be described as catastrophic, Martu are affirming the value of individuals, and the primacy of family and kin relationships. While preserving cultural continuity, they display cultural dynamism, innovation and creativity, and a degree of autonomy and control that is seldom possible in other spheres of their lives. It is as if they have chosen to deal with a reality they feel helpless to alter by applying their energy and skills to making it a celebration of who they are.

Acknowledgements

This paper is the result of research conducted between 2002 and 2005 with the support of an Australian Research Council Discovery grant, and also research done in 1974 and 1978 supported by grants from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. I wish to thank the following people for their careful reading of, and valuable comments on, earlier drafts: Yasmine Musharbash, Nancy Williams, Katie Glaskin, Victoria Burbank and Bob Tonkinson. Any enduring errors and infelicities are entirely of my doing.

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