# Grief as Social Fact: Notes from Southern Benin

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*This article explores the socialisation of the experience of grief in Southern Benin. Drawing on field research conducted in Southern Benin since the beginning of the 2000s and mobilising interviews and participant observations with bereaved people, I argue that grief is profoundly shaped by interiorised dispositions to think, act and feel, as well as social experiences (from family relationships to religious practices and economic conditions, among other things). The article mainly exemplifies this contention with two ethnographic vignettes, which respectively emphasise the significant place that funerals take locally in the grieving experience, and approach the issue of the socialisation of infant deaths.*

**Key words:** Grief, funerals, death, mourning, Benin

Although the social organisation and the management of death have been at the heart of the anthropological tradition since the beginning of the 20th century, the grieving experience has not been a topic that anthropologists have much investigated, a situation that stands in sharp contrast with the enduring interest for grief in the psychoanalytical and psychological traditions. In the following pages, I will in fact advocate for an approach of grief attentive to its deeply social nature, and highlight important social forces that shape that painful and intimate experience in Southern Benin.

There is surely a long tradition of scholarship on death in anthropology and in social and human sciences more broadly. Yet in this corpus of literature, the most widely acknowledged contribution of anthropology to the study of death and mourning undoubtedly resides in the numerous accounts of non-Western funerary rites documented by some generations of anthropologists throughout the 20th century. In Africa, studies of mortuary rites and institutions were for decades largely focused on the complexities of 'customary' or 'traditional' rites and logics in the handling of death. This attention paid to ritual developed perhaps at the expense of a relative neglect of other perspectives, such as the social making of emotions in both ritual and non-ritual contexts, and the intimacies of grief, though African societies in general have long had the reputation of being '"good' at dealing with death' (Lee and Vaughan 2008). Relative neglect however, does not mean absolute concealment. In his 1962 monograph for

instance, Jack Goody was noting that we might learn about the socialisation of the experience of grief from an analysis of the organisation of 'crucial social relationships' in a society, and from 'the variations in relationships between members of adjacent generations' (1962:23). With his Lodagaa case in mind, he underscored for instance, in a book otherwise largely focused on the local mortuary rites system, that:

> in most non-literate societies the senior generation retain their rights to the end, and transmission is often literally a matter of waiting to step into deadmen's shoes. Moreover, when the junior generation's main avenue to exclusive rights is by a system of next-of-kin transmission, the shoes in question are those of a near and in some ways dear kinsman. Thus the situation of the haves and the have-nots is exacerbated by the heir's anticipation of the benefits to be reaped after the moment of transfer, which usually coincides with death. (Goody 1962:93)

Such a wide generalisation was probably somewhat perilous, but Goody was surely right in reintroducing the whole social configuration in the understanding of grief, as well as the issue of the material conditions of existence. As sociologist Florence Weber (2005), among others, has since then convincingly showed in her research on practical kinship in France, attachments and feelings cannot be understood independently of material stakes and conditions of existence as a whole, and should always be thought of together, a contention that Lynn Thomas and Jennifer Cole (2009) have also recently illustrated in a very convincing manner about love in Africa.

Therefore, taking the measure of how grief is an intrinsically social experience, and not only a mental 'work' dominated by the unconscious as in early psychoanalytical writings (Freud 1988; Klein 1978), nor even a psychic process only taking place in a social 'context', should inevitably be at the core of any anthropological perspective on grief. As social sciences have indeed shown for decades now, socialisation shapes, in Durkheim's words, our very 'ways of acting, of thinking and of feeling' (2007:4), and there is no sociological or anthropological reason to consider that grief constitutes an exception. I will thus argue here that complex socialisation processes, and social experiences in general (from family relationships to religious practices and economic conditions, among other things), shape our perspectives on loss and death, just as our other social experiences, tastes, beliefs and practices, our dispositions to think, act, and feel. The widespread 'medicalisation' of death in Western societies for instance, now regularly feeds popular concerns about the 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' nature of various forms of grieving (Bradbury 1999), and these conversations, common among bereaved individuals themselves, contribute to shape the way grief is lived and experienced, and not only its expressions. Or, to take another Western example, French anthropologist Albert Piette has shown in a very personal and sensitive 'auto-ethnography' about his own experience of bereavement, how both his Catholic religious education and faith, as well as his professional disposition to write had shaped his mourning for his father, as he intensified his religious practice

and wrote lots of *souvenirs* related to the deceased in the months that followed his passing away (Piette 2005).[1]

In Africa – though this situation cannot be considered as only and essentially African – there would probably be a lot to say about the experience of grief of people accused of witchcraft and regarded as the murderers of their own relatives. Adam Ashforth's *Madumo* (2000) has been a notable milestone in such a direction. Though not being explicitly written as an ethnography of grief, Madumo's story shows particularly well how the intimacy of the grieving experience has an intrinsic social nature. Being accused of having murdered his own mother through witchcraft, Madumo indeed soon becomes an outcast in his own family, and his grief quickly becomes intimately entangled to that experience. Having been particularly 'close' to his mother, his loss is yet entwined with circumstances where Madumo is 'robbed of the right to mourn her death' (Ashforth 2000:18–9), which makes his situation even more psychically violent and constitutes an experience which leads him on the verge of a suicide, opens a period of intense social insecurity and initiates a long and harassing spiritual journey.

Generally speaking, however, grief is not a topic that many anthropologists have embraced beyond ritual contexts. Indeed, since Renato Rosaldo has recalled that the grieving process was taking place 'both in ritual settings *and* in the informal settings of everyday life' (1993:13–4), little concrete anthropological work has been done to deploy an ethnographic approach of grief beyond ritual situations. Indeed, in Africa, the focus of 'classical' anthropology on mourning rituals has been essentially widened in other directions. In the fast growing body of literature on current African funeral practices (a recent comprehensive review is provided by Jindra and Noret 2011), the main axis emphasised are probably the issues of social and economic investments in these events and the development of a 'funeral industry' (Tingbé-Azalou 1993; Arhin 1994; Van der Geest 2000, 2006; De Witte 2003; Rodriguez-Torres 2003), as well as the complexities of social arrangements, rural-urban relationships, and belonging funerals deploy (Vidal 1986; Gilbert 1988; Tonda 2000; Smith 2004; Geschiere 2005; Lee 2011), and the multifarious effects of religious change (Droz 2003; Noret 2004; Ranger 2004; Jindra 2005; Becker 2009).[2] This body of literature, however, rarely makes significant room for the experiences of grief of social actors, reproducing the gap existing in death studies between the Western world, where numerous studies have engaged with the complexities of the grieving experience, and non-Western worlds, where the personal experience of grief remains much less documented (Hockey 2001:198–9). Therefore, this article can also be read as a plea for more anthropological engagement with the intimacies of the grieving experience in Africa.

In what follows, I will argue that interiorised dispositions to think, act and feel, as well as past social experiences of social actors, all structure the way grief is lived and felt in Southern Benin. To this end, I will essentially use two ethnographic

vignettes, in following the two major losses that a Beninese friend (whose name I changed in this article to preserve his anonymity) experienced in 2005 and 2006, namely those of his father and of his first born baby. In the first vignette, I will specifically illustrate a point that seemed crucial to me when I began being interested in the socialisation of grief in Southern Benin, namely the local importance of funerals in the construction of a sense of fulfilled duty towards the deceased, which gives these events their existential tune, and makes their importance in the grieving process. In the second one, I will briefly touch to the issue of the socialisation of infant deaths.

## The Death and Funerals of Clovis' Father

When Clovis' father died in Cotonou, Benin's economic capital, at the beginning of 2005, from a cancer discovered approximately six months before, his sickness had cost several months of income to each of his children, who were all receiving modest salaries or living on small trades. The old man had been suffering enormously, but they never abandoned him because of the costs his care was demanding, as it sometimes happen, and as I myself witnessed one or two times in towns and villages of Southern Benin where people had brought back their sick parents by relatives of 'the village', and were since rarely coming, or had even asked to be called after their death (similar cases are reported in Ghana by Van der Geest (2000) and De Witte (2001)).

Conversely to these kinds of situations (which one can probably assume that they are also sometimes related to suspicions of witchcraft), the fidelity of Clovis and his siblings to their father was openly acknowledged in their family and lineage circles, and in his last days, the old man himself told them to stop to give him things to eat, because he was 'already eating with the elders', as he put it, that is with his ancestors. He was in fact meaning that he was dying, refusing to burden his children any further. Drugs against pain had in the last days of his agony a more and more limited effect, and the children finally removed the most important charms or 'gris-gris' that their father was wearing, since they had understood that these powerful objects were preventing death from happening, and prolonging the suffering of the old man. Simultaneously however, they continued to buy anti-pain drugs until the last hours of the agony.

After these months of treatments, the children had virtually no more savings. However, they had now to organise the funeral. In Southern Benin, taking the funeral of one's parents in charge is a fundamental social duty. In everyday life, people can for instance comment on their poverty in saying that, having children, they have at least people who will bury them, even if they have no resources to live a decent life. Occasionally hearing this phrase in their parents' mouth, as well as other similar statements, children progressively come to learn the social value funerals have locally. Or, to take just another example, the duty to care for one's parents burial also provides a common metaphor to thank a benevolent child:

'you have already buried me' is a conventional way to thank your (adult) child for an important gift or service that (s)he provided to you . . . which does certainly not free a child from effectively taking the burial in charge.

These are just two short examples, but the fact is that the duty to bury one's parents is a point massively inculcated to children by diverse actors of their socialisation, first in their family circle, and then among their groups of peers, when friends, classmates and colleagues are confronted with deaths in their respective families, and the issue of funerals emerges in conversations, visits of condolences are made and contributions collected.

In Clovis' case, my friend fortunately received some money from other friends, which allowed him to organise a decent burial for his father. I remember, however, conversations in which he was expressing anxiety about how to manage the reception that would follow the burial: as the main source of expenses, the reception of the guests is often too the main concern of mourners (see Noret 2010a:126–8, 145–8). At the heart of our regular discussions in those difficult days were thus money issues (would he be able to receive his colleagues with enough food and drinks? and other similar questions), but also concerns about how to please the people of the hometown neighbourhood where the funeral would take place, or how to organise the lying-in-state of the deceased in a way that would respect his father's last will, as the latter had explicitly demanded that his corpse should not be visible to everybody, and remain kept at a distance of part of his own patrilineage.

Finally, the day of the funeral arrived. The first part of it, a Catholic funeral wake, took place in his father's house in Cotonou. The next day, we moved to Clovis' hometown where the 'traditional' lineage rites were performed, and the reception for the guests was held. We stayed there for two days, Clovis managed to receive his guests according to the expected standards for a young executive living in Cotonou (the economic capital of the country), and I did not hear any criticism of the way he had managed things. In fact, he spent everything he had, as organising a befitting burial for his father was something most important to him. Compared to Western standards, the funerals he organised were probably expensive, since he invested more than one month's salary in the event, plus the significant amount of money he had received from friends, and served impressive quantities of food and drinks to his guests regarding the months of huge expenses he had already faced during his father's illness. However, organising a dignified burial for his father certainly played for him a key role in the construction of a sense of fulfilled funeral duty, appearing in this respect as a key moment in the grieving process. At the end of the burial ceremonies, Clovis was visibly exhausted, but also satisfied with what he had accomplished.

In underlying this, I certainly do not want to argue that funeral expenses are mostly motivated by grief. Funerals and personal feelings of grief are indeed distinct, though potentially partly overlapping, phenomena. In Southern Benin, where

funerals are grand affairs mobilising widely in the social networks of the mourners, the multiple and multifarious social stakes of the burial ceremonies are much too evident to be ignored as key factors in the investment in these events. However, it is simultaneously regularly said in Southern Benin that funerals 'are a debt that we repay' to our parents when we organise their burial. To put it in Maussian terms, funerals are much more conceived in terms of an obligation to return than in terms of a 'free' gift or honour paid to the dead. Similarly, it is not uncommon to hear people interpreting events that immediately follow a burial as signs of the benevolence of the dead towards them, indirectly showing that the dead actually mattered too as a motive to organise a befitting burial.

In fact, what I want to stress here is that, for the children of a deceased person, funerals have very often appeared to me as constituting a key moment in the construction of a feeling of fulfilled duty towards the departed, several informants saying for instance in conversations (without being solicited) that the fate of their deceased parent had stopped to worry them after the funeral – they had now performed the necessary rituals, and the departed would be able to find a place 'on the other side'. And reciprocally, in some cases I met people that I have known well, and who were unable, for diverse reasons, to participate as they should have in the funerals of their parents, as they were dragging in the following months, and sometimes year, a form of psychic *malaise*. Psychically and even physically exhausted by the successive deaths of her father and then of her husband within six months at the end of the 1990s, one of my landladies in Southern Benin in the 2000s was unable to participate as she should have to the funerals of her mother when she died a few months afterwards. In the early 2000s, we had daily conversations during my periods of fieldwork and she told me regularly how she was dreaming about her mother, as if the latter was requesting something from her, which is generally not considered a good thing in Southern Benin, and which she interpreted as a consequence of the difficulties of her mother 'on the other side'. A few years later, she managed to organise a commemoration service with a reception, and then told me she had stopped to dream.

In fact, funerals in Africa certainly are major arenas of social change, of cultural dynamics, and events where people invest a lot of time, of energy and of money, because a lot of things are at play, as a whole body of literature convincingly demonstrates (see Vidal 1986; Gilbert 1988; Van der Geest 2000; De Witte 2001; Englund 2001; Smith 2004; Noret 2010a). But among the many things that are at play, I would like to make a case here for the fact that grief and the desire to pay respect to the departed cannot be ignored as a social reason for the major social investments in funerals. Indeed, in a series of articles dedicated to intergenerational relationships in Southern Ghana (a context which is quite close to the current situation in Southern Benin), Sjaak van der Geest has convincingly argued that the central principle underpinning the relations of deferred reciprocity between generations was the concern for returning care to ageing parents,

in the case when the latter had themselves cared well for their children, providing them not only with food but also with education, therefore securing their future (see notably Van der Geest 1997, 2002). Exploring the local social value of money, Van der Geest also emphasises that giving money to elders was a conventional 'way of showing respect' (1997:536) and, in the case of children, 'emotional expressions, proof of loving care' towards their parents (2002:28). And that funerals can be explicitly mentioned as part of the expected deferred reciprocity that parents who have cared for their children can expect from them (1997:548). Van der Geest even writes explicitly that 'the funeral should be regarded as a kind of care as well', through which a matrilineage 'shows its respect and affection for the deceased', while also building its public status as a united and prosperous collective (2002:17).

These interpretations of intergenerational relations and of the place of funerals within it are particularly suggestive, as they help to understand obsequies as entangled with concerns for the departed, and as a gesture of benevolence towards the deceased, which can be considered as a manifestation of grief. Paying respect to the deceased in the appropriate, conventional (though historically contingent) forms can indeed be suggestively thought of as a key dimension in the grieving experience (see Noret 2010a).[3] And in societies like those of Southern Ghana or Southern Benin, where the social obligation of organising dignifying burials for one's parents is inculcated very early to children, grand funerals constitute *par excellence* this conventional way to honour the deceased, and the fulfilment of such a duty is an essential part of the experience of grief. Organising illustrious burials is therefore not only about showing off and deliberate status-seeking strategies. For the children of a departed person in particular, it is also, notably, trying to save one's face in order, not only to avoid being considered an unworthy man or woman, but also an unworthy son or daughter. It is also about being able to feel righteous about the duties that one is expected to accomplish towards one's parents.

Actually, people often engage themselves in funerals 'at all costs' (Noret 2010a), both literally and metaphorically. The psychic, social and economic costs of funerals are therefore huge, as they are key moments in family relationships where conflicts are to be avoided even if they are most likely to occur, for diverse reasons including disagreements on a funeral 'scenario' or about heritage issues, for instance. Additionally, social norms regarding the funeral standards concerning the reception of guests, especially, add economic pressure on socially, and sometimes psychically, already tense moments.

Having different social engagements (as child, but also as spouse, as parent, etc), a man burying his father, for instance, often knows the difficulties the expenses he is committing will cause in his household for months (or even years) after the event, and people may be in such occasions really cleft between parts of themselves (on the social constitution of the plural nature of the self, see Lahire 1998, 2002),

being both an orphan having to bury his father but also a spouse and a father who must care for his household. People in general perfectly know the difficulties that the funeral expenses may cause in household finances in the following months. Writing about Malawi, Harri Englund writes for instance that 'the existential and material burden of funerals' may be 'particularly distressing for both moral and material reasons' in urban townships (2001:99–100). In Southern Africa, Erik Bähre (2007) similarly points out the difficulties and (social and psychic) tensions arising from the difficulties to face both the demands for solidarity coming from burial societies and the obligations towards close kin inside one's household or family.

With their multiple and multilayered stakes, funerals are in fact 'passionate sociodrama' where engaging one's social and economic capitals can take an existential turn (Vidal 1986). I have often seen my informants involving themselves in such events with apprehension, anxiety, or even anguish, wondering if they would be equal to the task, able to host their guest in a satisfactory manner and to please everybody in a way that would ensure them recognition and a feeling of fulfilled duty (see also Englund 2001; Bähre 2007). The fact that in Southern Benin as in many other regions of Africa, the dialectics of interiorised norms and social pressures often convince the vast majority of social actors to organise funerals beyond their means, should not lead to consider that lavishness and conspicuous consumption cannot be grounded in ambivalent and paradoxical feelings, being both actions that can move people very intimately, and the source of social questions and debates, in Southern Benin as in several other regions of Africa.

## The Death of Clovis' First Born

In 2006, approximately one year after the death of his father, Clovis' first born unexpectedly died a few days after birth. Expecting finally a first child in his early 30s, which is a bit late regarding Beninese standards, he had spent quite a lot of money during the pregnancy, in order to make all the requested tests and try to secure the situation as much as he could. Just after the delivery, he also gave enough money to the cousin of his wife in charge of helping her in the maternity (private) hospital. However, the care provided to the newborn girl was unable to keep her alive when complications unexpectedly started just a few days after her birth, and she died. I was not in Benin at that time, but a few days later, I had a phone call with Clovis, who confided to me that it had been 'the harshest day in [his] life', and that it had been 'harder than the death of [his] father'. The newborn baby was quickly buried in a compound of Clovis' (now deceased) father where Clovis' elder brother was living, in the Eastern part of Cotonou. As it is customary on such an occasion, neither Clovis nor his wife attended the burial, which was unceremonious: in Southern Benin in general, and especially when the deceased child is not a young adult yet, parents are not supposed to attend the burial, as it is the duty of children to bury their parents, and not the

opposite. Additionally, as customary again (see Herskovits 1938:395), the little corpse was not buried in a coffin but in banana tree leafs, in a symbolic attempt to stimulate the fertility of the bereaved mother,[4] as there is a well-known proverb in Southern Benin which states that 'the banana tree does not remain without children', and banana trees are largely associated with abundant fertility.

Here again, it appears that interiorised expectations and experiences fully shaped the experience of grief. Slightly younger than him, his wife was approaching 30, and a woman of that age was really expected to have children according to the local social norms. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) brilliantly argued 20 years ago, there are most probably differences between societies regarding the ways infant deaths are lived. Therefore, members of societies structurally experiencing high rates of infant deaths, as it is the case in Southern Benin, are probably most likely to go through such experiences with less difficulties than it is the case in the West, where several studies have pointed to the fact that such deaths often are radical psychic disasters (see Moriarty, Carroll and Cotroneo 1996; Klass 1996; Thuen 1997). However, high mortality rates do not automatically produce forms of 'acceptances' of infant deaths 'without weeping', as Joníná Einarsdóttir (2004) has convincingly argued in her study of mother love and mothers' grief in Guinea Bissau:[5] other aspects of the social situations should be taken into account, as the way babies and young children are conceived of and treated by their mothers, the meanings that are conferred to their deaths, the status that being a mother confers (or not) to women, among other things. In Southern Benin, a mother losing a baby a few weeks or a few months after giving birth can weep seriously, complaining for instance that 'the wound [of the vagina] has not healed yet', yet the baby has already gone …

In fact, differences between societies probably exist regarding reactions to infant deaths, and there is certainly much comparative anthropological work to be done here (Noret 2010b). However, I think that we also need to think of differences on a more individual scale, inside a single society, since there might certainly be as many intra-society differences as inter-societies differences here. In Clovis' case, it is evident that the long-expected and very desired nature of the pregnancy, combined with (a) the relatively advanced age of both Clovis and his wife, (b) the fact that all their respective brothers and sisters already had children, and finally (c) the amount of money invested in the medical monitoring of the whole process, all reinforced one another, to make the death of the newborn baby a really hard loss to deal with for both Clovis and his wife. Within the local space of possible feelings after an infant passing away, Clovis' situation was, for instance, radically different from unexpected and undesired pregnancies of high-school pupils, which regularly break the school careers of so many girls in Southern Benin, without a father able, or willing, to support the costs, sometimes even without an easily identifiable father, which is always a source of disgrace and shame. Clovis received support and moral assistance from his siblings, as well as from some

of his friends and colleagues in the days and weeks that followed the tragedy. Due to the relatively important rate of recurrence of baby deaths in Southern Benin, it is not uncommon to have relatives, friends and colleagues who have also gone through such a difficult experience, and as Clovis put it to me a few months later, when I came back to Benin, 'they are the ones who will especially come to you and console you'.

Yet another dimension of Clovis' experience was his strong expectation of a child and the importance of financial means he had deployed to make sure that the pregnancy and childbirth would succeed, which was quite different from other local situations where parents anticipate a new birth with anxiety because of the (sometimes already extreme) precariousness of their economic situation. As another friend put it to me recently: 'there are cases where [financial] means are lacking and it [the loss of a newborn baby] is not a big loss, that's how it goes, my brother ...' By comparison, Clovis' baby was fondly desired in a stable couple, and her arrival was definitely not understood as an unexpected burden, but rather as finally conferring the position of parents to two adults eager to access this status, years after their respective siblings had had their firstborns. Additionally, Clovis was the first member of his family with a university degree, he had travelled in Europe once, and was suspecting some of his cousins, uncles and aunts to test his capacities at the occult level – indeed, Clovis later gave to understand to a common friend that his firstborn's death might have been the result of bewitchment from one of his patrilineal aunts. In Clovis' view, her jealousy had given birth to occult aggression, which was certainly highly morally reprehensible, though an all too common outcome of family division. This was then undoubtedly an additional factor framing the experience of his grief, which also resulted from an occult defeat. The emotional complexity (and thickness) of grieving experiences could indeed hardly be underestimated, as grief inevitably takes place in social situations in which loss is entangled with other meanings and experiences – as, in Clovis' case, occult aggression and the previous passing away of his father.

In short, as this brief vignette suggests, interiorised moral dispositions and social expectations frame *ab initio* and *ab interiore* the experience of grief, and the socialisation of grief is therefore an issue which cannot be conceived only in terms of a context providing more or less social support, and in more or less convenient forms (for recent research framing the issue of child loss in terms of social support, see for instance Moriarty et al. (1996); Thuen (1997); Laakso and Paunonen-Ilmonen (2002)). Or, to put it another way, cultures and meanings not only 'dictate the way that grief is manifested and expressed' (Stroebe and Schut 1999:220), as two renowned psychologists recently put it, but more profoundly frame the experience of loss itself (see Scheper-Hughes 1992:419–33), and shape the grieving process.

## Conclusion

To summarise my argument, I have tried in this article to show the profoundly social nature of grief, beyond and beside the public organisation of mourning, and to illustrate this perspective with two ethnographic vignettes. In both cases, it is indeed impossible to understand the way death and loss were experienced without considering not only a social 'context', but more fundamentally the interiorised dispositions, the ethos and habits, of the social actors involved in these processes.

To put things briefly, regarding the intergenerational relationships, and the ways people face the death of their parents, investments in funerals in Southern Benin are often huge because of the importance of what is at play in terms of social relationships and identity, but also, for the children of a deceased person, in terms of righteousness to their parent. For diverse reasons, including issues of reputation, but regularly too the idea that a befitting funeral pleases the deceased, everyone is trying to avoid organising a poor funeral, and to appear as somebody without sufficient 'means' to invest in the funerals. What is at play regularly has an almost existential dimension for the social actors involved, and the expenses consented appear rather as 'conducts of honour' than as mere ostentatious consumption, as Claudine Vidal (1986) already noted 25 years ago in Ivory Coast. In fact, considering the crucial place funerals hold in the making of a feeling of fulfilled duty towards one's parents in Southern Benin, the socialisation of grief emerges as a fundamental dimension to be taken into account in the deployment of ethnographies of bereavement.

Yet, as the second ethnographic vignette recalls, the relation to the deceased person, the family context of loss, the past social experiences, and the meaning of death, all shape the grieving process and confer to grief its very social nature. The meaning attributed to loss, which is inevitably shaped by interiorised past social experiences is essential to understand the way grief is lived. Loss is surely a universal phenomenon, but it always concerns social actors with particular systems of meaning, and dispositions towards life and death that are both socially and historically constituted. The dominant relation to death in a society and the manner different types of deaths are suffered inevitably shape the psychic experience of grief. Both losses that affected Clovis in the mid-2000s were framed by his *ethos*, first, when he invested all what he had in his father's funeral, which was the way he could consider himself, among other things that were at stake then, as a worthy son; and second, when the passing away of his much expected first-born baby heavily affected him, as this experience was simultaneously, among other aspects that were straightaway entangled with his grieving for the baby, a persisting denial of the status of father, an occult defeat, the tragic outcome of a period of significant economic efforts aiming at securing as much as he could the pregnancy and the childbirth. In fact, just as medical anthropology has documented for decades that psychic suffering is a

highly socialised phenomenon, the psychic experience of grief is inevitably shaped by the social experiences and dispositions interiorised by social actors.

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### Notes

1. Indeed, funerals and mourning practices more generally do not contain the whole experience of grief. The gap between them can even be a source of additional tension for the bereaved agents, or cause social malaise. For anthropological discussions of such situations based on Asian examples, see Wikan (1990) and Delaplace (2009).
2. The works cited here evoke just a sample of this bulk of literature, a more comprehensive review is provided by Jindra and Noret (2011).
3. A more detailed psychoanalytical version of this general argument, which in a sense invites one to rethink grief under the auspices of gift relations, and implies a critique of the classical Freudian view of grief as a process of disengagement from affective bonds with the deceased (Freud 1988), can be found in the work of Lacanian psychoanalyst Jean Allouch (1997).
4. It is one of the many aspects of the local forms of masculine domination that the responsibility of infertility is largely supposed to be women's fault in Southern Benin.
5. On the divergence between Scheper-Hughes' and Einarsdóttir's views, see Noret (2010b).

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