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Keeping the Dead Alive Through Ritual Creativity

An Investigation of the Identity Perception of the Deceased by the Bereaved in the Context of Visiting Urn Graves in a Nature Cemetery in the Netherlands

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Abstract

This thesis examines the role of ritual in preserving the identity of the deceased by the bereaved, with a specific focus on the urn burial process at the Schoorsveld Nature Cemetery in the Netherlands. Central to this study is "Visiting the Grave," a key practice in maintaining the deceased's identity that involves various rituals.

Based on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 6 participants who buried someone in a nature cemetery, the research analyzes the urn burial process—containing components like cremation, ash collection, burial, and grave visits—through Victor Turner's framework of separation, liminality, and incorporation, highlighting how each stage involves ritual creativity and transformation. Focussed is on grave visits, which occur during the stage of incorporation and include several categories such as feeling, reflecting and connecting with the deceased through nature; these are all related to rituals performed around the grave.

The study builds upon Unruh's concept of identity strategies, redefined here as "identity tactics," to describe the specific ways in which the deceased's identity is preserved by the bereaved. The research identifies both existing and new identity tactics, including "Continued Bonding Activities," "Sanctifying Meaningful Symbols," "Incorporating Shared Practices and Memories," "Creating New Symbols and Rituals," and "Shaping or Sustaining After-Life Beliefs." These tactics illustrate how identity preservation occurs through external actions and through internal processes.

To deepen the understanding of these tactics, the thesis applies dialogical self-theory and narrative identity theory. These theories show how the bereaved maintain an internal dialogue with the deceased, in which the deceased continues to occupy a position within the self. The deceased's identity is thus integrated into the bereaved's personal life story and inner world, reinforcing their continued relevance in daily life.

Finally, this study offers practical insights for *Natuurbegraven Nederland*, the organization managing Schoorsveld, by illustrating how their burial setting supports personalized forms of identity preservation. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of ritual creativity and identity in contemporary funerary practices.

Keywords: urn burials, ritual creativity, identity tactics, identity preservation, visiting the grave

Contents

1. Introduction

The Netherlands is increasingly understood as a secular society. The process of secularization has transformed the way people seek meaning and connection in their lives. This is evident in declining church attendance and the emergence of personalized practices that are not necessarily tied to religion.[1] Rather than adhering to the customs of a single religious tradition, many individuals are crafting rituals that reflect their own identities and beliefs.[2] Already in the 1990s, Becker et al. demonstrated in their research on secularization and well-being that, during the process of secularization, alternative options to traditional rituals are being enacted at an increasing pace.[3] However, their focus was primarily on broad social trends, neglecting more specific developments, such as those of death rituals.

Rituals surrounding events like Christmas and marriage have, according to Becker et al., been influenced by secularization, as people seek to express themselves outside traditional religious boundaries. For example, marriage and Christmas celebrations in the Netherlands now often include diverse philosophical or spiritual elements that reflect personal or cultural backgrounds. This same process of transformation is evident in mourning and death rituals, which have shifted to accommodate secular perspectives, individual expressions, and multicultural influences. Quartier's research on All Souls' Day exemplifies how traditional Christian commemoration practices are evolving.[4] The thesis illustrates how an originally Christian tradition of commemoration is adapted to secular trends by incorporating fewer or non-religious elements, such as replacing liturgical texts with secular ones, thereby making the celebration more accessible to a heterogeneous group of visitors. His research, however, centers on the evolution of Christian traditions, while rituals that do not as explicitly originate from Christian fundaments also change in response to secularization, personalization, and multiculturalism.

Alternative perspectives on death have led to more personalized practices, which are also influenced by environmental concerns and multicultural aspects, as illustrated in a research paper

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[1] Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport, "Ontkerkelijking leidt tot nieuwe verhoudingen in de samenleving ," *Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau*," March 24, 2022, https://www.scp.nl/actueel/nieuws/2022/03/24/ontkerkelijking-leidt-tot-nieuwe-verhoudingen-in-de-samenleving.

[2] J. W. Becker, J. J. M. de Hart, and J. Mens, *Secularisatie en alternatieve zingeving in Nederland*, Sociale en culturele studies 24 (Rijswijk: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 1997).

[3] Becker, Hart, and Mens. *Secularisatie en alternatieve zingeving*.

[4] Thomas Quartier, "Mourning Rituals – Between Faith and Personalisation: Changing Ritual Repertoires on All Souls Day in the Netherlands," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 10, no. 4 (2010): 334–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/1474225X.2010.507735.

investigating ritual developments in Quebec.[5] An example from the Netherlands is that Islamic burial practices are increasingly incorporated into funeral options, showing the growing multiculturalism in Dutch society.[6] In addition, the increasing popularity of incorporating sustainable aspects, as evident in the rise of nature burials, reflects a growing environmental awareness and concern for sustainability.[7] These changes related to secularity reflect broader societal trends toward individuality, ecological consciousness, and cultural diversity.

As said before, the development that reflects changing attitudes toward death is the rise of nature cemeteries in the Netherlands.[8] These burial grounds are intentionally integrated into the natural environment, often in forests or meadows, and promote ecological sustainability by, for example, limiting traditional grave markers and encouraging biodegradable burial options.[9] Nature cemeteries resonate with those who seek a meaningful, not specifically religious, and environmentally conscious form of commemoration. Within such cemeteries, urn burials—where cremated remains are interred in natural settings— are becoming increasingly popular.[10] They provide a flexible alternative to conventional full-body burials, as the bereaved may design personalized rituals that blend memorialization with nature.[11] However, while such settings are rich in symbolic and ritual potential, the specific ways in which urn burials in nature cemeteries foster identity preservation and creative ritual expression remain underexplored.

While secularization and personalization in death rituals have been explored in previous studies, key gaps remain. Venbrux et al. examined emerging burial practices and discussed that personalization has become a defining feature of contemporary funerals.[12] Additionally, the book "Rituele Creativiteit Rondom de Dood" by Venbrux et al. provides detailed analyses of ritual innovation, which they call "ritual creativity" to emphasize how bereaved individuals creatively shape death rituals to align with

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[5] Deirdre Meintel, "Ritual Creativity: Why and What For? Examples from Quebec," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 28, no. 2 (2014): 77–91.

[6] Eric Venbrux, Janneke Peelen, and Marga Altena, "Going Dutch: Individualisation, Secularisation and Changes in Death Rites," *Mortality*, May 1, 2009, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576270902807508.

[7] Venbrux, Peelen, and Altena.

[8] Barry de Vries and Wim de Haas, "Natuurbegraven in Nederland," *Vakblad Natuur, Bos, Landschap*, 2017.

[9] Douglas J. Davies and Hannah Rumble, *Natural Burial: Traditional - Secular Spiritualities and Funeral Innovation* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/rug/detail.action?docID=3003451.

[10] Meike Heessels, *Bringing Home the Dead: Ritualizing Cremation in the Netherlands* (Nijmegen: Radboud University, 2012).

[11] Davies and Rumble, *Natural Burial*.

[12] Venbrux, Peelen, and Altena, "Going Dutch."

their personal and cultural identities.[13] Their work highlights the diversity in Dutch death rituals, providing various examples, such as adaptations of Christian traditions and the development of new commemorative spaces. However, despite discussing a wide range of ritual changes, the specific dynamics of ritual creativity in nature burial settings have not been thoroughly explored. Also, while Venbrux and Heessels offer an extensive framework for ritual creativity, the role of identity preservation within funerary settings is neglected.

Mathijssen's research offers valuable insights into Dutch funerary practices as well, such as the manifestation and occurrence of nature burials, motivations behind choosing nature burials, and the role of material objects and ashes in mourning processes.[14] However, she primarily focuses on the burial itself and the environmental aspects of nature cemeteries, paying less attention to post-burial rituals in the context of nature burials, such as personalized visits to graves. Additionally, while Mathijssen investigated the role of ashes in continuing bonds with the deceased, the use of nature cemeteries as ash destinations has not been examined in depth, particularly in terms of identity preservation. In addition, although Mathijssen investigates post-burial rituals by discussing ash destinations, grave visits also represent an essential but underexplored aspect of the bereavement process.

The gaps in the literature underscore the need for further research on how bereaved individuals creatively utilize rituals in nature cemeteries and preserve the identity of the deceased in these contexts. Therefore, this thesis aims to address the gaps by examining how bereaved individuals shape commemorative practices around urn graves in nature cemeteries in the Netherlands. Specifically, it examines how ritual creativity emerges and how grave visiting rituals influence identity preservation. Additionally, through investigating visits to urn graves, specific elements and practices that relate to the material of ashes might be found.

The thesis draws on several theories to explore identity preservation and ritual creativity in urn burials, applying these concepts to data from interviews conducted with bereaved individuals who buried an urn at the Schoorsveld nature cemetery. It first explores how urn burials are structured,

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[13] H. J. M. Venbrux, S. H. Bolt, and M. Heessels, "Rituele Creativiteit Rondom de Dood," in *Rituele Creativiteit: Actuele Veranderingen in de Uitvaart- en Rouwcultuur in Nederland*, ed. M. Heessels and S. Bolt (2008), 9-15, https://repository.ubn.ru.nl/handle/2066/71763.
[14] Brenda Mathijssen, "Mapping Nature Burial in the Netherlands (2003–2023)," *Mortality*, advance online publication, 2025. 1–32, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2025.2449904.
Brenda Mathijssen, "The Ambiguity of Human Ashes: Exploring Encounters with Cremated Remains in the Netherlands," *Death Studies* 41, no. 1, 2017: 34–41, https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2016.1257882.
Brenda Mathijssen, "Transforming Bonds: Ritualising Post-Mortem Relationships in the Netherlands," *Mortality* 23, no. 3, 2018: 215–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2017.1364228.

incorporating Turner's concepts of separation, liminality, and incorporation.[15] By applying these stages to the urn burial process (this process ranges from dying and death to incorporation and continued identity preservation), the study demonstrates how these phases of ritual transformation occur before, during, and after the urn burial, as well as in post-burial rituals. Ritual creativity, for instance as discussed by Venbrux et al., is applied to these stages to highlight how the bereaved create personalized rituals during the urn burial process.[16]

Consequently, Unruh's theory of identity strategies offers a foundational lens for understanding how identity preservation occurs in grave visiting rituals.[17] However, in this thesis, the term "strategies" is replaced with the term "tactics," building upon De Certeau's concept of tactics.[18] De Certeau distinguishes between tactics—creative, adaptive actions taken outside institutional control—and strategies, which are planned actions influenced by authority and power. Since this thesis focuses on personal, creative actions that occur largely outside of institutional authority, tactics is considered a more fitting term in the context of this study. Through the analysis of the interview data, new identity tactics emerged, enhancing Unruh's original framework and offering a more nuanced understanding of identity preservation in the context of funeral rituals. In addition, theories of narrative identity and the dialogical self are used to deepen the analysis of identity preservation in rituals of remembrance, revealing dynamics behind identity tactics.[19]

By combining these theoretical concepts, this thesis provides fresh insights into contemporary funeral practices, particularly by examining how urn burial rituals in nature cemeteries in the Netherlands play a crucial role in preserving the identity of the deceased.

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[15] Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Cornell University Press, 1967).

[16] Venbrux, Bolt, and Heessels, "Rituele Creativiteit Rondom de Dood."

[17] David R. Unruh, "Death and Personal History: Strategies of Identity Preservation," *Social Problems* 30, no. 3 (1983): 340–51, https://doi.org/10.2307/800358.

[18] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

[19] Dan P. McAdams, "Narrative Identity: What Is It? What Does It Do? How Do You Measure It?," *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* 37, no. 3 (2018): 359–72, https://doi.org/10.1177/0276236618756704. Hubert J. M. Hermans and Thorsten Gieser, "Introductory Chapter: History, Main Tenets and Core Concepts of Dialogical Self Theory," in *Handbook of Dialogical Self Theory*, ed. Hubert J. M. Hermans and Thorsten Gieser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139030434.002.

Research question

The research question that is addressed is:

How do the bereaved creatively employ and understand rituals around visiting the urn grave in nature cemeteries in the Netherlands concerning the identity preservation of the deceased?

This question is addressed through answering three sub-questions, which are all consequential steps in answering the research question. These sub-questions are:

1. What does the ritual process of urn burials entail, and what is the role of grave visits within this process?
2. What role does ritual creativity play in urn burials, particularly in grave visits?
3. What identity preservation tactics can be identified in grave visits to a nature cemetery?

By answering these research questions, this thesis aims to contribute to academic debates concerning death rituals, ritual creativity, identity tactics, and identity preservations of the dead, as well as to inform nature burial professionals and organizations. By giving insights into what the bereaved consider valuable in grave visits, it aims to stimulate discussions about how nature burial organizations can respond to the needs of the bereaved. Furthermore, the thesis will expand the understanding of how creatively designed funeral rituals, specifically in a nature cemetery, play a role in the remembrance of the deceased, which is relevant knowledge for future investigations about mourning and ritual creativity in the changing Dutch funeral culture.

Outline of the Thesis

The upcoming chapter will outline the methods applied in the thesis. Following this section, the theoretical foundations of the thesis will be explored in Chapter 3, which outlines the theoretical framework. The results of the thesis are then presented in two chapters, each contributing to answering the main research question. The fourth chapter connects theoretical foundations about ritual and ritual creativity to the urn burial process. It addresses the sub-questions: *What does the ritual process of urn burials entail, and what is the role of grave visits within this process?* And *What role does ritual creativity play in urn burials, particularly in grave visits?* The fifth chapter builds further upon this question by discussing the relationship between visiting the grave and identity tactics, as well as the dynamics behind these. It does so by answering the sub-question: *What identity preservation tactics can be*

identified in grave visits to a nature cemetery? Lastly, the discussion and conclusion of the thesis will answer the research question and critically evaluate the results discussed in the previous chapters.

2. Methodology

This thesis employs a qualitative research design, with semi-structured interviews as the primary research method, to investigate the role of ritual creativity and identity preservation in urn burials in nature cemeteries in the Netherlands. The study explores how the bereaved use rituals, particularly during visits to the grave, to preserve the identity of the deceased. By focusing on identity tactics and ritual creativity, the research aims to explore how ritual acts in the cemetery help the bereaved preserve the deceased's identity.

The study is a case study focusing on the nature cemetery Schoorsveld, which is a rich context for understanding urn burials in nature. Case studies are ideal for examining complex, real-life situations and allow for the exploration of individual experiences, such as those of the bereaved, within a specific context, in this case, Schoorsveld.[20]

Additionally, the study employs a grounded theory approach, a qualitative research methodology that aims to develop theories grounded in empirical data. This approach enables the thesis to generate new theoretical insights, furthering Unruh's theory about identity strategies.[21]

2.1. Fieldwork and Preliminary Research

The Schoorsveld cemetery was visited three times to gather background information, familiarize with the site, and conduct interviews. During these visits, conversations with cemetery employees provided insights into the practical aspects of urn burials, as well as about the ritual practices they observed among visitors. Walks around the cemetery were conducted to experience the atmosphere and gain a sense of the environment in which the studied rituals take place. This provided a deeper understanding of the context and helped frame the interview questions accordingly.

The information from these visits, for instance about the role of employees in the organization of urn burials, was incorporated into the analysis, particularly in the deductive coding process. Observations and conversations during these visits highlighted the importance of certain rituals and practices, which were further explored in the interviews.

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[20] Pamela Baxter and Susan Jack, "Qualitative Case Study Methodology: Study Design and Implementation for Novice Researchers," *The Qualitative Report* 13, no. 4 (2008): 544–60.
[21] Cathy Urquhart, "Grounded Theory's Best Kept Secret: The Ability to Build Theory," in *The SAGE Handbook of Current Developments in Grounded Theory*, ed. Antony Bryant, Kathy Charmaz, and Cathy Urquhart (London: SAGE Publications, 2019), 89–106, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526485656.

2.2. Interviews

The primary research method applied in this study is semi-structured interviews. This method allows for in-depth exploration of the bereaved's perspectives, not strictly following a guide but also providing space for asking of additional questions about topics that emerge during the interview, thereby gaining rich insights into personal stories and experiences.[22] In this thesis, semi-structured interview data provide insights into what the bereaved do around the grave and why, which components play a role, and how this may impact the preservation of the deceased's identity. Identity strategies (Unruh), the dialogical self-theory (Hermans), the narrative identity theory (McAdams), rites of passage (Turner), and ritual creativity (e.g., Venbrux et al.) provide the theoretical foundation for interpreting the data.[23]

Interview participants were recruited by Natuurbegraven Nederland, the organization that facilitates nature burials at Schoorsveld. Six candidates, each of whom had buried the ashes of a loved one at the cemetery, were selected for interviews. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 120 minutes.

The interview guide was designed based on a combination of literature review, including existing studies on nature burials, rituals, and identity preservation, and a guide developed by Dr. Brenda Mathijssen on nature burials. The context of the interviews was carefully considered, as, for practical reasons, three were conducted online, and three took place in person at the cemetery. This is important to acknowledge, as the interview setting can influence how participants respond.

After the interviews were conducted and transcribed verbatim, several inductive (derived from the interviews) and deductive (theoretical or pre-established) codes were formulated following multiple readings of the interviews.[24] The themes addressed in the interview guide included general questions about the nature cemetery, the choice of an urn burial, ash destinations, the urn burial ceremony, worldview, and views towards nature.

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[22] Steinar Kvale, "Introduction to Interview Research," in *Doing Interviews* (London: SAGE Publications, 2007), 2–10, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849208963.

[23] Unruh, "Death and Personal History."
Hubert J. M. Hermans and Thorsten Gieser, "Introductory Chapter: History, Main Tenets and Core Concepts of Dialogical Self Theory," in *Handbook of Dialogical Self Theory*, ed. Hubert J. M. Hermans and Thorsten Gieser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139030434.002.
McAdams, "Narrative Identity."
Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*.
Venbrux, Bolt, and Heessels, "Rituele Creativiteit Rondom de Dood."

[24] Ajay Gupta, *Qualitative Methods and Data Analysis Using ATLAS.Ti: A Comprehensive Researchers' Manual* (Cham: Springer, 2024), 103, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-49650-9.

2.3.   Characteristics of Sample

This study included six interviewees selected based on their choice of an urn burial at the Schoorsveld Cemetery. Participants were recruited by Natuurbegraven Nederland, ensuring that all participants had direct experience with or a personal connection to urn burials at this site. The participant data are presented in table 1.

Table 1: Participant Data

Category	Person 1	Person 2	Person 3	Person 4	Person 5	Person 6
Year of Birth	1970	1968	1974	1985	1962	1971
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Male	Female
Current Residence	Oisterwijk	Nuenen	Heeze	Beek en Donk	Groningen	Heeze
Place of Birth	Geldrop	Nuenen	Eindhoven	Eindhoven	Heeswijk Dinther	Heeze
Parents' Country of Birth	Netherlands	Netherlands	Netherlands	Netherlands	Netherlands	Netherlands
Education Level	Higher Professional Education (HBO)	Pre-vocational Secondary Education (VBO/MAVO/VMBO) / Secondary Vocational Education (MBO-1)	Senior General Secondary Education (HAVO) / Pre-University Education (VWO) / Intermediate Vocational Education (MBO 2-4)	Senior General Secondary Education (HAVO) / Pre-University Education (VWO) / Intermediate Vocational Education (MBO 2-4)	Senior General Secondary Education (HAVO) / Pre-University Education (VWO) / Intermediate Vocational Education (MBO 2-4)	Higher Professional Education (HBO)
Marital Status	Married	Single	Married	Widow	Widower	Married
Children	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Current Belief System	Atheism	Buddhism or none	Catholicism	None	Catholicism	Agnosticism

Although the age range among the participants was limited, and most interviewees were female, the sample provides a representation of individuals with diverse educational backgrounds, family situations, and belief systems. Their shared experience of choosing an urn burial at Schoorsveld offers valuable insights into the motivations and perspectives surrounding this form of interment.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

During the research project, ethical standards were met to ensure that participants' rights were respected throughout the research process. Prior to the interviews, participants received an information sheet that explained the purpose of the study, potential risks, and the management of their data. All participants provided informed consent, either through a signed form or by verbally agreeing on the audio recording. The research was conducted with respect for confidentiality and anonymity, and all interview data were anonymized in the final transcripts.

The sensitive nature of the research topic (the death of a loved one) was carefully handled during the interviews. The interviewer, for instance, provided space for quiet moments and offered breaks whenever participants appeared in need of rest. Additionally, interviewees were reminded of the confidential nature of the research and their ability to withdraw at any time. After the interviews, it was ensured that participants were informed that they could contact the researcher with any further questions or concerns.

The researcher securely stored the interview data collected for this study to ensure the confidentiality and protection of participants' information. The data were stored in a secure, access-controlled folder. They will be retained for five years and be permanently deleted after this period. Access to the data is limited to the researcher and the first supervisor of this thesis, who is utilizing the data for a related study.

2.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti, a software program for qualitative data analysis. ATLAS.ti was used to code and categorize interview data, facilitating the identification of key themes and patterns.[25] Both inductive and deductive coding strategies were applied.[26] Inductive codes were

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[25] Gupta, *Qualitative Methods and Data Analysis Using ATLAS.Ti*.
[26] W. P. Vogt, *Selecting the Right Analyses for Your Data: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods*, (New York: Guilford Publications, 2014).

developed based on patterns that emerged from the data, while deductive codes were based on pre-established theoretical findings regarding identity (tactics) and ritual creativity.

A cross-coding analysis was conducted to explore the overlap between identity tactics, ritual actions, and ritual creativity.[27] Key codes included identity tactics and aspects related to visiting the grave (inductive codes), like visitor center (interaction with staff and information), flowers, flower arrangements (ritual actions around flowers), reflection (personal moments of reflection during visits), and a connection with nature (engagement with the natural surroundings). Ritual creativity was added as a separate code to explore how the bereaved experience ritual creativity themselves and to discover how it appeared in combination with identity tactics and ritual acts. The cross-coding method allows the identification of co-occurrences between codes, which helps reveal patterns and relationships. In this thesis, cross-coding was used to disclose relationships between different aspects of the bereaved's engagement with rituals, identity preservation, and their interactions with the cemetery.

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[27] Unruh, "Death and Personal History."
Venbrux, Bolt, and Heessels, "Rituele Creativiteit Rondom de Dood."

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Urn Burials In Nature

In the current era of climate change, awareness about the protection of and connection with nature is growing in the Netherlands. This is evident in both individual choices and national policies related to climate change and sustainability. An example is the government's goal to reduce CO2 emissions.[28] The claim that 80% of Dutch customers are concerned about sustainability is another example.[29] Nature cemeteries can be linked to emerging ideologies related to ecology and sustainability.

However, nature cemeteries represent more than an environmentally conscious alternative to traditional burial; they reflect broader societal shifts in how death, identity, and ritual are approached in the contemporary Netherlands. Scholars such as Davies and Rumble argue that natural burial practices are embedded in emerging cultural ideologies regarding ecology, secularity, and spiritual individualism.[30] In the Dutch context, where secularization and individual expression continue to shape funeral practices, nature burials offer a meaningful space for non-traditional forms of commemoration.[31]

Within this broader context of nature cemeteries, urn burials in nature cemeteries, such as those at Schoorsveld, the site investigated in this thesis, offer a particularly fertile setting to explore how the bereaved shape commemorative practices. Cremation and the handling of ashes, as Mathijssen shows, have become central to Dutch mourning practices, providing mourners various ways to engage with the deceased and negotiate ongoing bonds.[32] Nature cemeteries support personal ways to commemorate the deceased by allowing cremated remains to be interred in natural surroundings, providing a space for the creation of urn burial or grave visiting rituals. This enables mourners to actively engage with the burial process and to express personal meanings through acts such as choosing a burial site or designing memorial signs. Thus, urn burials in nature offer not only ecological but also ritual opportunities.

To ground these discussions in a concrete setting, this thesis focuses on Schoorsveld, a nature cemetery managed by the organization Natuurbegraven Nederland (Nature Burial Netherlands). The

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[28] Ministerie van Algemene Zaken. "Step by Step, the Netherlands Is Transitioning to Sustainable Energy." Last Modified November 21, 2024. https://www.government.nl/topics/renewable-energy/step-by-step-the-netherlands-is-transitioning-to-sustainable-energy.

[29] KMPG, "Dutch People and Sustainable Consumption," October 13, 2023, https://kpmg.com/nl/en/home/insights/2023/08/dutch-sustainable-consumption.html.

[30] Davies and Rumble, *Natural Burial*.

[31] Venbrux, Peelen, and Altena, "Going Dutch."

[32] Mathijssen, "Transforming Bonds."

organization was established in 2012, presenting an emerging burial trend in the Netherlands.[33] Nature cemeteries are a relatively new development in the Netherlands, and have been linked to processes of secularization and individualization in society. The first nature cemetery in the Netherlands emerged around 1955, when an existing cemetery, Westerwolde, gradually transitioned into a nature cemetery.[34] The number of nature cemeteries, as well as options for nature burial, has grown ever since.[35] The first nature cemetery specifically designated as such is Bergerbos, established in 2003. As of 2023, there are 37 nature cemeteries in the country.[36]

A nature burial is a type of burial where the deceased are buried in a natural environment. Slices of wood are used as grave markers instead of conventional markers. Furthermore, ecological practices are used involving biodegradable materials, for example in grave decorations.[37] Nature burials emphasize the connection between humans and nature, contributing to the preservation and protection of natural areas.[38] Other unique aspects include the idea that human remains are returned to nature and that a nature cemetery provides an eternal resting place for the deceased.[39] Additionally, Natuurbegraven Nederland guarantees that the cemetery will remain a natural area forever, and the cemetery will be returned to Natuurmonumenten (a Dutch organization dedicated to preserving nature) after the area selected contains 10% of graves.[40]

Specific characteristics of the Schoorsveld cemetery are its unique and diverse natural surroundings, which include, for instance, fans, heathlands, forest areas, and open fields.[41] Employees play a vital role in facilitating burials and assist the bereaved where necessary. They, for example, show the bereaved (or individuals interested in being buried at the cemetery themselves) around, inform them, and help them in choosing a grave spot. They also assist in designing the grave monument, which is typically a slice of wood. The bereaved can then choose a text and/or a symbol to be engraved.

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[33] "10 jaar van betekenis voor mens en natuur," *Natuurbegraven Nederland*, accessed January 30, 2025, https://www.natuurbegravennederland.nl/10-jaar/.

[34] Mathijssen, "Mapping Nature Burial in the Netherlands (2003–2023)."

[35] De Vries and De Haas, "Natuurbegraven in Nederland."

[36] Mathijssen, "Mapping Nature Burial in the Netherlands (2003–2023)."

[37] "Wat is een natuurbegraafplaats?," *Natuurbegraven Nederland*, accessed January 29, 2025, https://www.natuurbegravennederland.nl/alles-over-natuurbegraven/natuurbegraafplaats/.

[38] "Wat is een natuurbegraafplaats?"

[39] "Samen verbonden met je natuur," *Natuurbegraven Nederland*, accessed February 2, 2024, https://www.natuurbegravennederland.nl/samen-verbonden-met-je-natuur/.

[40] "Natuurbegraven Nederland – Vereeuwig je natuur," *Natuurbegraven Nederland*, January 22, 2025, https://www.natuurbegravennederland.nl/.

[41] Personal Conversations with Employees and Observations in the Cemetery, March-April 2022.

The cemetery facilitates both urn graves and full-body graves. Urn graves, however, although referred to as such, do not necessarily contain an urn; ashes can also be buried without being contained within one. Since the organization uses the term 'urn burials,' they will be referred to as such in the thesis. In the case of an urn burial, the bereaved can bury the ashes themselves. Cemetery employees make a hole in the ground beforehand, where the ashes can be buried. Consequently, the bereaved can close the hole with shovels and earth during the burial ritual. There is also a visitor center located at the cemetery, offering coffee and tea, where the bereaved can meet, mourn, rest, or talk about the deceased with others. In addition, there is a separate room available at the location for the organization of burial ceremonies, which are also (partially) arranged by the employees of Natuurbegraven Nederland.

While some components of urn burials, such as the placement of a slice of wood as a memorial, are standard aspects of an urn burial on Schoorsveld, this thesis will demonstrate that there is also room for individual creativity in commemorating their loved ones in a personal manner.

3.2. Ash Destinations and Cremation in the Netherlands

Schoorsveld meets the general regulations concerning cremations and burials in the Netherlands, as established in national government policies. Since this project focuses on urn burials, it only addresses Dutch regulations related to cremation, not other types of burial or body disposal.[42]

When someone has passed away, it is mandatory to cremate the body between 36 hours to 6 working days after one's passing. It is possible to request a 6-day extension in exceptional situations. The postponement must be requested from the mayor or the public prosecutor. According to the Law on Funeral Services (Wet op de Lijkbezorging), after cremation, the crematorium is required to store the ashes for at least one month. Ashes can be collected in an ash container after this period, after which they can be buried or get another destination.

In the Netherlands, several options for ash destinations are available. The bereaved can, for example, decide to leave the ashes in an urn at home, they can store some of the ashes in ash jewelry like ash pendants, scatter the ashes in the open sea or at an indicated location for ash scatterings, take

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[42] Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, "Wanneer mag ik een overledene laten begraven of cremeren?," *Rijksoverheid*, May 10, 2011, https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/overlijden/vraag-en-antwoord/onderwerpen/overlijden/vraag-en-antwoord/welke-regels-gelden-er-bij-begraven-en-cremeren.

the ashes abroad, or they can bury the ashes in a cemetery.[43] Schoorsveld provides one option: to bury ashes at a nature cemetery. Burial takes place under the humus layer, and the ashes can be buried in an urn made of biodegradable materials or directly into the soil. The thesis will demonstrate how this form of ash destination may influence the bereaved's perception of the deceased's identity, specifically during grave visits. By doing so, the thesis will contribute to the existing knowledge about funeral practices in the Netherlands.

3.3.   Defining Ritual

The concept of ritual has a wide range of definitions; many scholars have attempted to define the term. Examples of commonly used definitions include those formulated by Turner, Bell, and Grimes. Their definitions were formed based on ethnographical observations of what they considered rituals. Since no ritual is the same or consists of the same aspects, their definitions are not fully applicable to each ritual. However, these definitions can serve as a guideline for what is generally considered a ritual. They are also foundations for many newer theories about ritual.

Ronald Grimes defines rituals as "sequences of ordinary action rendered special by their condensation, elevation, or stylization."[44] He states that "The meaning of 'ritual' depends on the context."[45] He also identified seven elements of ritual that can serve as a framework for studying ritual, helping to grasp the complexity of ritual. Those elements are places, symbols, time, actors, actions, objects, and language.[46] Each of these elements will appear in the ritual acts that are addressed in the results, for example: the location of the grave (place), natural elements like birds or butterflies that symbolize the deceased (symbols), how long the bereaved spend time at the grave or on which dates they choose to visit the grave (time), who are present at the grave and perform the ritual acts (actors), acts like placing flowers (actions), objects like flowers and the memorial sign that are involved in the ritual (objects), and what is said or thought when at the grave (language). Although these elements are not explicitly discussed in the results, they play an integral role in the rituals and their meanings.

Victor Turner, who established another well-known framework of ritual, considers ritual to be "prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to

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[43] Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, "Wat mag ik doen met de as van een overledene?," *Rijksoverheid*, July 21, 2015, https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/overlijden/vraag-en-antwoord/onderwerpen/overlijden/vraag-en-antwoord/wat-kan-ik-doen-met-het-as-van-een-overledene.
[44] Ronald L. Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 71, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195301427.001.0001.
[45] Grimes, 71.
[46] Grimes, 71.

mystical beings or powers."[47] According to Turner, another essential aspect of rituals is their transformative power, as well as the presence of a phase of liminality, which is a transitional phase in which the ritual object is neither what it was nor what it becomes after the ritual.[48] Turner, building on Van Gennep's concept of rites of passage, identifies three key stages in rituals: separation, where an individual or group is detached from their previous state or status; liminality, a phase in which transformation takes place; and reincorporation, where the subject is reintegrated into society with a new role or identity. In this thesis, these three stages are applied to the urn burial process to highlight the ritual significance of different components of the burial.

Turner's theory is relevant for studying urn burials in nature because these rituals follow transitional stages of separation, liminality, and incorporation. His emphasis on transformation offers a valuable framework for understanding how the identity of the deceased is gradually integrated into the lives of the bereaved. While the rituals studied are more personalized, and embedded in a secular-natural context than the rites Turner examined, his theory highlights how transitions are structured, and shows how meaning is made or transformed through ritual acts. Also, when combined with a perspective of ritual creativity, Turner's framework proves to be adaptable. This view allows to shed light on how rituals evolve while still fulfilling functions of transformation and incorporation.

Bell's interpretation of ritual offers insights into the dynamics and structure of ritual, which apply to the way ritual is viewed in this thesis. Her perspective on ritual, also called ritualization, focuses on how rituals function to create distinctions between the sacred and the profane, reinforce identities, and establish social order.[49] By doing this, she challenges traditional definitions that consider ritual as a fixed category, viewing it instead as a fluid and dynamic practice that varies across cultures and historical contexts. This thesis supports this view of ritual and is especially interested in the fluidity and reinforcement of identities, as discussed by Bell. She also believes that ritual includes elements that address something beyond the real world. This is similar to the 'mystical power' Turner refers to: ritual is involved with aspects that go beyond the real, the obvious, or the visible.[50] Examples of such aspects include ritual elements, such as symbols. While a symbol is visible in the real world, its meaning is not

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[47] Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 19.

[48] Victor Turner, *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975) http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv1nhkns.

[49] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 197-210, http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy-ub.rug.nl/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=406025&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[50] Turner, *The Forest of Symbols, 19*.

immediately apparent to everyone except to those who are performing or experiencing the ritual. In the case of the studied rituals surrounding urn burials, the mystical power is associated with the deceased or death; the thing that is not graspable in the 'real world' and is interpreted and redefined during the ritual. Symbols that acquire a new meaning during the ritual can also be considered 'mystical' in this sense.

Building on the definitions provided by Bell, Grimes, and Turner, rituals are understood to be contextual, to incorporate ritual elements (Grimes), to possess a mystical quality, and to be transformative. They are also performed in a specific manner and order, which makes them meaningful to the bereaved since those aspects matter to the participants in the ritual. While the discussed rituals are not always 'prescribed' in the sense that they have always been performed in a certain way, they often originate from existing rituals in Dutch funeral culture and have, to some extent, a similar structure and similar origins. However, in the context of the urn burials discussed in this thesis, rituals are individualized and adapted to the wishes and needs of the bereaved and (implicitly) the deceased, while the form of the ritual (the structure of the ritual; what makes it recognizable as a ritual, such as Turner's three stages theory) gives it its meaning, the design of the ritual (how the ritual is carried out and personally shaped) is flexible and primarily shaped by the bereaved.

3.4. Ritual Creativity

While many traditional theories of ritual, such as those by Turner and Grimes, address rituals as a cultural or group-based phenomenon, the grave visits studied in this thesis are primarily individual or small-group practices.

Traditional theories often focus on the collective aspects of ritual, emphasizing shared structures, behaviors, and symbols. Scholars like Turner have highlighted the social functions of ritual, with an emphasis on the predictable and repetitive nature of these acts.[51] While such frameworks are essential for understanding the collective dimension of rituals, they often overlook the dynamic and individualized processes that occur within rituals.

However, more recent research increasingly recognizes the role of the individual. Scholars like Bell pointed to the need for incorporating the role of individual agency in understanding rituals.[52] Bell, for instance, discusses how ritualization can be understood as a process of personal interpretation within a framework of socially prescribed practices. Here, she also acknowledges that existing practices impact

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[51] Turner, *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual*.
[52] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*.

individual rituals and experiences. Each person is likely to have a unique experience of a ritual and will engage with different elements of the ritual in their way. Even when rituals are not individualized, their impact will still vary for each participant. This can be explained through a psychological perspective: everyone appraises a ritual differently.[53] The meaning given to the ritual is shaped by varying life experiences, contextual factors, and even genetic or neurological characteristics. Therefore, while rituals can be performed collectively and participants engage in rituals from a shared perspective or culture, it seems impossible to create a collective experience that is identical for all participants. Each individual's experience, although interpretations might be based on similar worldviews, will differ, even within the same ritual. Studying individual experiences can, therefore, lead to unique findings.

Meintel recognizes the power of individual agency in rituals, as seen in her work on ritual creativity and healing rituals.[54] She argues that rituals only have a function when they are perceived as meaningful by the participants. Ritual agency, along with innovations that reflect contemporary values (such as the inclusion of an LGBTQIA+ flag), contribute to the efficacy of the ritual. According to Meintel, ritual creativity enhances the transformative power of rituals, especially in the context of healing. This transformation is achieved through the integration of personal, contextually relevant elements that align with the individual's wishes and needs. Meintel emphasizes that ritual agency and the incorporation of contemporary elements are crucial aspects of ritual creativity. In addition, Meintel argues that ritual creativity strengthens the bond between the individual and the ritual.[55] While she outlines essential characteristics of creative rituals, she does not delve deeply into the specific aspects of these rituals. In contrast, this thesis will provide a more detailed description of rituals as narrated by their performers, the bereaved. This focus on individual choices within creative rituals offers a more nuanced understanding of how individuals construct their ritual practices.

Mogliocco discusses ritual creativity in the context of the empowerment of women and states that: "We are concerned here with ritual as an expressive, performative feature of religion and human culture more broadly, which intrinsically involves creativity, dynamism, and the ability to respond to shifting social issues."[56]

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[53] Nicholas M. Hobson et al., "The Psychology of Rituals: An Integrative Review and Process-Based Framework," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 22, no. 3 (August 1, 2018): 260–84, https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868317734944.
[54] Meintel, "Ritual Creativity."
[55] Meintel.
[56] Sabina Magliocco, "Introduction: Ritual Creativity, Emotions and the Body," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 28, no. 2 (2014): 2.

The concept of ritual creativity can thus be defined as the creative and dynamic production of new rituals tailored to the individual and their specific context. The performative aspect of ritual, as discussed by Bell, is an essential aspect to consider when aiming to understand rituals and ritual creativity, as it reveals how actors utilize space for personalization in ritual acts.[57] Rather than simply following a fixed script, participants actively interpret and shape rituals through their actions. According to Bell, rituals often respond to dilemmas; situations of tension or contradiction that rituals try to resolve. In the context of death, these dilemmas might include the contrast between life and death, or the physical absence of the deceased versus their ongoing presence in the minds of the bereaved. These tensions create a space for performance, where participants creatively express and negotiate meaning through symbolic gestures, objects, or acts. While Bell uses the term performance rather than ritual creativity, her view highlights how rituals are not just repeated traditions but also flexible processes. However, she assumes that performance occurs in a relatively stable ritual structure. In contrast, the concept of ritual creativity allows for even more flexibility and acknowledges that people may invent or reshape rituals beyond existing frameworks to meet their personal needs.

Venbrux et al. provide a detailed discussion of ritual creativity in the context of Dutch funerals, highlighting how contemporary mourning practices are increasingly shaped by personal expression and innovation.[58] They argue that traditional, standardized funeral rites are giving way to individually crafted rituals that reflect the identities of both the deceased and the bereaved. The authors identify a trend in which the bereaved incorporate originality into their ritual expressions, demonstrating a desire to create meaningful and authentic commemorations. This shift can be seen as part of broader societal changes, where personalization plays an increasing role in ritual practices surrounding death. By examining various case studies, Venbrux et al. demonstrate that ritual creativity enables mourners to negotiate meaning in a shifting religious and cultural landscape where traditional rituals may no longer adequately express grief and honor the dead. They claim that the bereaved, therefore, engage in a dynamic process of adaptation by combining established rituals or ritual structures with personalized elements to create authentic, personal ceremonies. In doing so, they acknowledge the role of cultural or collective influences on ritual creativity: rituals are created based on pre-existing, traditional ideas about funerals and have evolved from there. In addition, (cultural) values concerning what a burial should look like impact how urn burials are shaped. In the case of urn burials in a nature cemetery, shared values are

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[57] Catherine Bell, "Ritual Tensions: Tribal and Catholic," *Studia Liturgica* 32, no. 1 (2002): 15–28, https://doi.org/10.1177/003932070203200102.
[58] Venbrux, Bolt, and Heessels, "Rituele Creativiteit Rondom de Dood."

reflected as well; some interviewees, for example, noted that the idea of returning to nature played a significant role in their decision to choose an urn burial, reflecting common values associated with nature burials.

This thesis builds on the work of Venbrux et al. by investigating largely individualized rituals surrounding the visit to a nature cemetery as a form of ritual creativity. By focusing on how these rituals serve as personalized acts of commemoration, it explores how ritual creativity is a way through which the bereaved preserve the identity of the deceased. The study examines how mourners integrate their understanding of the deceased's identity into their ritual practices, revealing an interplay between personal memories, ecological values, and ritual innovation. In doing so, the research project contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between ritual creativity and identity preservation, further expanding the discussion initiated by Venbrux et al.

While the term ritual creativity is used in this thesis, other concepts that describe a similar phenomenon include ritual personalization and ritual innovation. Like ritual creativity, these both aim to describe adjustments in contemporary rituals that relate to societal trends of individualization. Ritual innovation focuses on changes in ritual triggered by the cultural context and neglects how rituals are adapted to the identities of the people involved in the ritual.[59] Ritual personalization, on the other hand, acknowledges the role of individuals in adapting rituals.[60] However, the creative aspects that are emphasized by ritual creativity are less acknowledged when speaking of ritual personalization. Aiming to grasp the complexity of ritual including the role of identity and creativity, ritual creativity is the term that is predominatnly used in the thesis; it understands ritual as a dynamic, creative process in which various factors, such as emotions, memories, and contextual influences, intertwine.

3.5.   Identity and Relationships with the Deceased

Several scholars have attempted to establish what identity is and how it develops. Erikson's theory is a classic and influential psychological framework for understanding identity.[61] He states that life consists of several identity stages and that transitioning to the next stage is often accompanied by an identity crisis. While Erikson discusses several stages during life, he does not address the role of death in identity development, as the self no longer experiences this stage. Death is, however, experienced by others, and

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[59] Richard S. Ascough, "Ritual Modification and Innovation," in *Early Christian Ritual Life,* ed. Richard Demaris, Jason Lamoreaux, and Steven Muir (New York: Routledge, 2018): 167-182.

[60] Elaine J. Ramshaw, "The Personalization of Postmodern Post-Mortem Rituals," *Pastoral Psychology* 59, no. 2 (2010): 171–78, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-009-0234-6.

[61] Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994).

the identity perception of the deceased by the bereaved continues after one's death. Therefore, it is relevant to acknowledge that others, both during life and after death, play a role in shaping one's identity, or at least in how identity is perceived.

The social identity theory acknowledges the impact of others on identity forming by arguing that belonging to a group influences identity: an individual partially identifies the self based on the group's identity.[62] Additionally, belonging to a group leads the individual to identify themselves in contrast to others and other groups. This theory does not address how group identities might play a role in the identity of the deceased, but it is likely that their belonging to social groups impacts how they are memorized after their death.

Another theory that addresses how others play a role in identity forming is the dialogical self-theory as discussed by Hermans.[63] He claims that the self consists of several parts, which he refers to as "I-positions." Examples of I positions are "child of my parents", "student", or "widow." These fragments are part of the self, and all separate I positions in a person combined, form one's identity. Hermans also discusses the role of others in identity formation: others play a role in the I-positions that are created, and others play a role in the manifestation of certain I-positions during conversations. An example is that the self can be positioned by another person based on the other's perception. When a mother addresses her child in a motherly manner, the child is positioned as "the child of the mother" and will behave accordingly in a conversation with their mother. It is important to note that I-positions are not entirely distinct versions of the self: I-positions might overlap, or similar I-positions might be presented in different relationships. Nevertheless, the dialogical self-theory primarily addresses identity development during life and focuses on how the self's identity is constructed and presented through internal and external conversations. An example of how I-positions might manifest in this thesis is that the bereaved construct the identity of the deceased based on their (previous) relationship with the deceased and the I-positions that occured during this relationship. Children of the deceased will, for instance, perceive the deceased differently than colleagues since different roles or I-positions were present in those relationships during their lifetime: they knew different fragments of the deceased, which impacts the continued dialogues with the deceased and, consequently, their identity perception by the bereaved.

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[62] Henri Tajfel, *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
[63] Hubert J. M. Hermans, *Between Dreaming and Recognition Seeking: The Emergence of Dialogical Self Theory* (Blue Ridge Summit: University Press of America, 2012), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/rug/detail.action?docID=977239.

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An additional theory that investigates the construction of identity is the narrative identity theory by McAdams.[64] He discusses how identity can be expressed through narratives of the self, where the self integrates past experiences, current circumstances, and future aspirations into a coherent and meaningful whole; a life story that can be considered the presentation of one's identity. While McAdams sees identity as expressed and perceived by the self, as explained earlier, others also perceive one's identity, and those perceptions can also be expressed in narratives. This thesis will address such narratives of others. Those narratives, thus, do not reveal how the deceased perceived their own identity but instead present the identity perception of the bereaved. Identity perception depends on the circumstances and experiences known to the narrator, and a narrative by the other will, therefore, differ from the self's identity narrative, as discussed by McAdams. An interesting aspect of this thesis is that it not only investigates life experiences related to identity but also illustrates that experiences that occur after one's death can be connected to one's identity, leading to the continuance of the deceased's identity through the experiences and memories of the bereaved.

Many dominant theories in the field of identity studies, such as the ones discussed in this paragraph, examine the development of identity throughout life. The thesis aims to contribute to these theories by showing how identity is preserved after death.

3.6. Death Rituals and Identity

The previous paragraph discussed theories that demonstrate how the social environment influences identity. While the deceased are (as far as we know) unable to experience identity and discontinue their process of identity-forming, this thesis shows that the identities of the dead proceed to exist in the lives of the bereaved. This was already proposed by Hertz in his essay, "The Collective Representation of Death" as discussed by Davies. Hertz claimed that when a person passes away, their identity continues to exist in the social context of the deceased.[65] This identity is not erased but instead transformed into a new state. According to him, the function of death rituals is the transference of the identity of the deceased to such a new state. The upcoming paragraph will further elaborate upon how the identity of the dead is discussed in existing theories and how identity relates to death rituals.

In this thesis, the 'transformed' continuance of the deceased's identity by the bereaved through ritual is considered an essential aspect of the deceased's identity. The thesis illustrates that the creation

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[64] McAdams, "Narrative Identity."
[65] Douglas Davies, "Interpreting Death Rites," *Death, Ritual and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/rug/detail.action?docID=5108576.

of ritual (see ritual creativity, p. 19-22) is one way how the renegotiation of the deceased's identity can be manifested, explaining how rituals embody functions, strategies, and tactics that contribute to the reshaping of a deceased's identity. Ritual aspects will be inferred from narratives of the bereaved to demonstrate how they perceive rituals and identity, as well as how the bereaved participate in the continuation of the deceased's identity.

Death rituals are, according to Nations et al., important for the mourning process, among other things, because they play a role in the transformation of the meaning of the dead body and the relationship with the deceased person who used to be connected to a living body.[66] Like Nations et al.'s paper, this thesis will address the continuance of the relationship between the living and the dead through ritual aspects. Nations et al. established three separate stages that play a role in the changing relationship with a dead body. The first stage is the Preparation Stage, during which the body is cared for and readied for ritual, often through practices such as embalming, dressing, or washing. It is physically set apart from the living world. The second stage is called the Mourning or Ritual Stage, during which the body becomes the focus of mourning rituals, such as funerals or memorial services, where the community comes together to process grief and honor the deceased. The last stage is the Abjection Stage, during which the body is ultimately viewed as abject or separate from the social order. It is disposed of through burial, cremation, or other methods, symbolizing the end of its social role.

While Nations et al. examine how the relationship with the dead body evolves up to and shortly after burial, this thesis expands on their work by exploring what happens in the longer term, specifically regarding the relationship between the living and the dead during grave visits.[67] Additionally, while the paper by Nations et al. focuses on the material dimension in this transformation of the dead body, this thesis aims to establish how creativity is manifested in making sense of the deceased's identity. Doing this, the thesis also recognizes that the social role of the deceased does not end, but persists in the narratives of the bereaved. This scope adds to the perspective of Nations et al. because it addresses the continuance of the identity of the deceased, even after the body is (in Nation et al.'s words), abject or separated from the social order.

In the studied context, but also in death rituals in general, materiality often plays an important role in the ritual actions that are performed; these actions, in turn, impact identity preservation. The dead body of Nations et al. is an example. Several theories also address the material dimension of death

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[66] Courtney Nations, Stacey Menzel Baker, and Eric Krszjzaniek, "Trying to Keep You: How Grief, Abjection, and Ritual Transform the Social Meanings of a Human Body," *Consumption Markets & Culture* 20, no. 5 (2017): 403–22, https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2017.1367678.
[67] Nations, Baker, and Krszjzaniek.

rituals. Pendergast et al., for instance, discuss this dimension of death rituals.[68] They argue that ashes leave room for personal memorialization and the creation of several forms of ash destinations and rituals. Ashes, thus, can facilitate room for ritual creativity since ashes can be incorporated into death rituals in several manners. The urn burials addressed in this thesis revolve around the ashes of the deceased. The thesis will add to Prendergast's paper by investigating specific cases in detail and connecting ritual acts around ashes (the grave) to their (memorized) identity.

Other scholars have also studied death rituals. Mathijssen, for instance, extensively examined death rituals in the Netherlands in several of her research projects.[69] She notes that traditional funeral rituals no longer adequately meet the needs of the bereaved to mourn the deceased, leading to the emergence of ritual innovation in contemporary funeral culture.[70]

In another research project about death rituals, Mathijssen discusses the phenomenon of "transforming bonds," which refers to the materiality of human remains.[71] She claims that the bereaved reshape their relationship with the deceased through material acts. This is, according to her, for example, visible in how the bereaved treat the material remains, for instance through making ash hangers, or by placing pictures of the deceased in their homes. Mathijssen illustrates how the bond transforms when the bereaved start to treat the remains of or objects related to the deceased differently. An example is that pictures of the deceased are moved to different spots during the mourning process: this shows the negotiation of the relationship with the deceased by the bereaved. In this thesis the materiality of human remains and how is dealt with those remains, will be studied as well. It will add knowledge to Mathijssen's study by showing how what she calls 'transforming bonds', and the materiality of human remains, play a role in rituals around visiting urn graves, and how these might impact the memorialization of the deceased by the bereaved. Also unique to this thesis is the context of a nature cemetery in relation to materiality and identity. Additionally, it aims to show how nature (implicitly) and natural elements and natural environments play a role in the remembrance of the deceased.

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[68] David Prendergast, "Blowing in the Wind? Identity, Materiality, and the Destinations of Human Ashes," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 12, no. 4 (2006): 729–747, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2006.00368.x.
[69] Mathijssen, "The Ambiguity of Human Ashes."
Mathijssen, "Transforming Bonds."
[70] Brenda Mathijssen, *Making Sense of Death: Ritual Practices and Situational Beliefs of the Recently Bereaved in the Netherlands*, Death Studies, vol. 5 (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2017), 20.
[71] Mathijssen, "Transforming Bonds."

Both materiality and the continuance or transformation of identity are important aspects discussed in the literature, which show the importance for the bereaved to create meaningful, personal post-mortem rituals for the deceased. By investigating a newly studied context, this project will contribute to existing knowledge about death, identity, and ritual (creativity).

3.7. Ritual Identity Tactics

The acts studied when visiting the grave can all be connected to the concept of tactics. During the performance and occurrence of rituals, tactics constitute practices that help renegotiate the identity of the bereaved.

De Certeau distinguishes tactics and strategies. They describe strategies as being performed within a defined, rational (e.g., economic, scientific, or political) space and as being created in power relationships: influential societal institutions and organizations implement strategies through their control over specific societal spaces.[72] Examples of strategies in urn burials include regulations surrounding burials and cremations, which are aspects of the burial that usually cannot be adjusted by individuals.

On the other hand, De Certeau identifies tactics as actions that arise from the absence of a proper locus or space or actions that can be created or performed freely within possibilities that are not limited by societal strategies. Tactics emerge from the daily life practices of an agent and are driven by the comfort or enjoyment associated with them. This means that tactics can be viewed as artistic or creative. In urn burials, tactics refer to the aspects of the burial that can be influenced by or are chosen by the bereaved. Therefore, tactics play a decisive role in the occurrence of ritual creativity. While De Certeau discusses strategies and tactics in the context of all activities that occur in a society, this thesis addresses those in light of death rituals. The theory about tactics and strategies helps establish which actions can be considered creative and which are influenced by broader society or formal structures. However, it is essential to recognize that there cannot be a hard line drawn between what De Certeau calls tactics and strategies because they can overlap and impact each other. While the focus of this thesis lies on tactics, it is worth noting that societal and cultural mechanisms influence these tactics, although this will not be discussed in detail.

Unruh addresses strategies in the context of death and identity. However, when placed in the perspective of De Certeau, what Unruh refers to as strategies are actually tactics since the strategies

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[72] Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 36-42.

discussed by Unruh are not necessarily tied to societal regulations. Instead, the strategies he speaks of are influenced by the actions and/or thoughts of individual agents. Therefore, tactics seems a more accurate term to use here, which will also be maintained in this thesis.

Unruh discusses the renegotiation of the deceased's identity by the bereaved through four tactics that are involved in this renegotiation on an emotional level: reinterpreting the mundane, redefining the negative, continued bonding activities, and sanctifying meaningful symbols.[73]

1. Reinterpreting the Mundane: First of all, ritual can be a form of reinterpreting the mundane, in which images, thoughts, and memories are organized after the death of a loved one. The tactic involves prioritizing and reshaping memories, enabling the bereaved to reframe ordinary moments as significant, which often contributes to the ongoing narrative of the deceased's life. Reflection moments and storytelling can serve as ritual examples during grave visits.

2. Redefining the Negative: In this tactic, the bereaved begin to appreciate the traits of the deceased they disliked before, and through this process, they reinterpret these 'negative characteristics' as positive. Rituals such as storytelling help the bereaved develop a more compassionate understanding of the deceased's more negative traits.

3. Continued Bonding Activities: Rituals can also be considered a 'continued bonding activity': acts that maintain the connection between the deceased and the bereaved. These activities strengthen an ongoing connection and help the bereaved transform their bond with the deceased. Rituals like placing flowers allow the bereaved to honor the deceased and experience connection.

4. Sanctifying Meaningful Symbols: Here, particular objects or elements are considered 'sacred' after the death of a loved one. For instance, natural elements or objects associated with the bereaved can start to symbolize their identity. These objects can have a special function in rituals, but they can also be sacralized during rituals, acquiring a symbolic status through the performance of a ritual.

Through an analysis of interviews, this thesis will expand the framework of Unruh and develop an updated version of his theory, evaluating existing tactics and introducing new ones in the context of visiting a nature cemetery.

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[73] Unruh, "Death and Personal History."

4. The Process of Urn Burials in Nature

This chapter investigates two sub-questions: *What does the ritual process of urn burials entail, and what is the role of grave visits within this process?* And *What role does ritual creativity play in urn burials, particularly in grave visits?*

The chapter draws on key theoretical insights from, among others, Venbrux and Heessels to understand how ritual creativity is expressed in urn burials.[74] They emphasize that ritual creativity is a dynamic, adaptive process in which individuals and communities modify established practices to reflect their unique experiences and needs, underscoring how personalized rituals allow for ongoing bonds with the deceased. The chapter examines how ritual creativity is expressed in various aspects of urn burials, including the selection of grave sites, the design of memorial signs, and the connection with nature during visits to graves.

The process of urn burials at the nature cemetery Schoorsveld, as derived from interview and observation data, consists of several distinct yet interconnected components, spanning from the period of life and dying to the ongoing preservation of the deceased's identity by the bereaved. These components are:

- Choosing for a nature burial at Schoorsveld (What contributed to the choice of a nature burial?)
- Choosing a Grave Location (Where in the cemetery is the deceased buried, and why?)
- Cremation (Why was the decision made to cremate the deceased?)
- Ash Collection (How and when are the ashes collected from the crematory?)
- Ash Burial (What did the burial ceremony entail?)
- Ash Destination (What was the destination of the ashes aside from burial?)
- Urn (What urn was used for the burial?)
- Memorial Sign (How was the memorial sign designed?)
- Visiting the Grave (What do the bereaved do when visiting the grave?)

Of these components, Visiting the Grave is considered the most fundamental for answering the research questions. It represents a recurring, ritualized act of remembering the deceased, making it

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[74] Venbrux, Bolt, and Heessels, "Rituele Creativiteit Rondom de Dood."

central to the preservation of identity. Recognizing the entire urn burial process is relevant when examining Visiting the Grave since each component contributes to the significance of this act. For instance, the location of the grave determines the setting for these visits, shaping how the deceased are memorialized over time.

To provide insights into the ritual process of urn burials in nature, this chapter situates these components within Victor Turner's three-phase framework of ritual, showing how rituals are transformational, which he calls rites of passage: separation, liminality, and incorporation.[75] Death itself can be understood as a phase of separation in separating the deceased from the realm of the living. Since this thesis mainly discusses components that occur after someone's death, liminality, and incorporation are the predominant stages that appear in the interview data. Each component of the urn burial process can be situated within these phases, with Visiting the Grave representing an ongoing act of incorporation that continually preserves the memory and identity of the deceased. This analysis is grounded in insights from the interview data. Figure 1 illustrates the urn burial process (from life till identity preservation) through the lens of Turner's rites of passage, highlighting the ongoing role of ritual creativity throughout all three stages, as rituals are performed during and after the urn burial process.
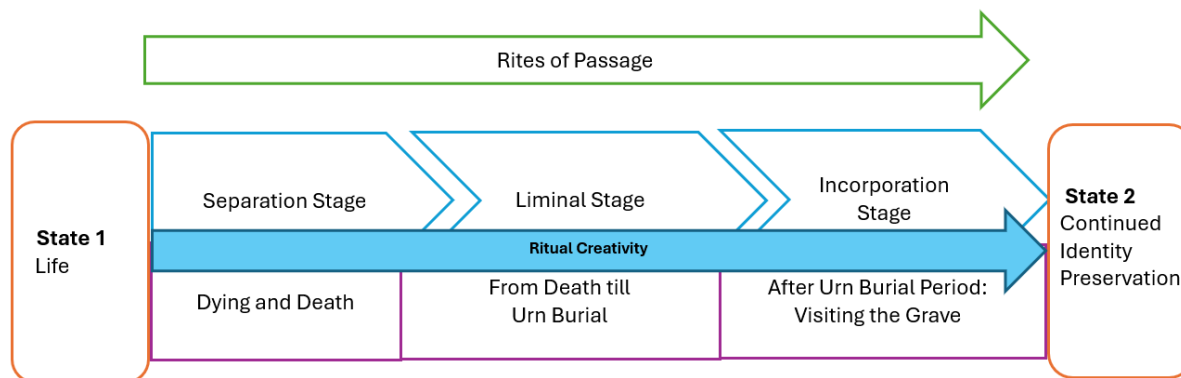

Figure 1: Urn Burial Process

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[75] Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*.

4.1. Liminal Components of an Urn Burial

Within Victor Turner's framework of rites of passage, the process from death to urn burial represents a phase of liminality. In burial rituals, the deceased exists in an in-between state, neither fully part of the living world nor entirely separated from it. This transition is marked by ritual actions that reshape the deceased's identity. Ritual creativity plays a key role as the bereaved personalize ceremonies and develop new ways to mediate this transition. This phase involves detaching the deceased from their former social role and preparing them for a new (after-life) status, with choices made by the bereaved shaping identity preservation in later rituals.

Selecting a Cemetery and Grave Location

Choosing a cemetery and grave signals an initial detachment from the world of the living. This component is also relevant to the subsequent ritual process, as the selection of the cemetery and the grave location set the stage for later rituals.[76]

The interview data suggest that symbolic elements may play a role in this choice. One participant, for instance, described how their familiarity with geo-caching, an outdoor activity that often leads people off established paths to find hidden 'caches' placed by other participants, influenced their preference for a more secluded burial spot. At the moment of decision, an unexpected event reinforced their choice:

"And because we do a lot of geocaching, which often takes us a bit further from the path, so I said: well, I'd like it to be a little further from the path. And at that moment, a deer passed by. Yes, for us, that was a sign that this was the right spot."[77]

This experience illustrates how natural signs and personal affinities can shape burial decisions, demonstrating ritual creativity in the selection process. The appearance of the deer was interpreted as a meaningful sign, reinforcing the connection to the chosen location.

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[76] Eva Reimers, "Death and Identity: Graves and Funerals as Cultural Communication," *Mortality* 4, no. 2 (1999): 147–66, https://doi.org/10.1080/713685976.
[77] Translated by the author. Transcript 1.

Some families even specifically seek out a nature cemetery because they appreciate the freedom to shape rituals according to their preferences (actually describing ritual creativity). One participant shared:

"It suits my wife and me well because we loved walking, nature, and the informal. [...] The nice thing about natural burial is that you can shape it yourself."[78]

By allowing for personalization and interaction with nature, the cemetery and grave location become spaces for ongoing, creative ritual practices.

Cremation

During cremation, the body is neither fully intact nor yet settled in its final resting place, whether in an urn, scattered, or buried. Cremation transforms the physical form of the deceased, resulting in a new form and material (ash) that plays a role in the urn burial. This transformation of the body into ashes might align with a mental shift in the bereaved as well. Hertz, for instance, notes in his research among the Olo Ngaju that a change in the materiality of the body not only resulted in rituals related to this new form but also led to a changed emotional state among his study subjects.[79] This value of ashes for the bereaved is also discussed by Mathijssen, who writes about how the material of ashes enables ritual acts with the remains of the dead, contributing to the transforming bond between the deceased and the bereaved.[80] Material remains, thus, can have an essential ritual value in memorialization practices, impacting how the bereaved creatively shape them as well. Heessels supports this claim by exploring how families creatively adapt cremation rituals to symbolize the deceased's unique characteristics.[81]

Interviewees also highlighted how the materiality of ashes influenced their decisions regarding cremation. One participant, for example, described how dividing the ashes allowed their family to engage in multiple memorial practices, keeping the deceased present in the lives of different family members:

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[78] Translated by the author. Transcript 5.
[79] Robert Hertz, "A Contribution to a Study of the Collective Representation of Death," in *Saints, Heroes, Myths, and Rites: Classical Durkheimian Studies of Religion and Society,* by Marcel Mauss, Henri Hubert, and Robert Hertz (London: Routledge, 2009), 109-181.
[80] Mathijssen, "Transforming Bonds."
[81] Meike Heessels, " Performing relations between the living and the dead," *Bringing Home the Dead: Ritualizing Cremation in the Netherlands* (Nijmegen: Radboud University, 2012).

"Certainly, we had jewelry made containing ashes. At home, we have an apple tree, which we received as a kind of memorial gift from people. We scattered some ashes there. And let me think... We all have a small urn with ashes at home—me and the children. Yes, and my in-laws have a small jar with ashes. My husband's brother also has a small jar with ashes. And we still have a few small bags of ashes at home, maybe for another destination in the future?"[82]

This example illustrates how cremation expands the range of ritual possibilities, allowing for personalization through various forms of ash destination. By distributing the ashes among relatives, incorporating them into jewelry, or even reserving portions for future decisions, the bereaved actively shape memorialization practices to fit their needs. Thus, the range of rituals and creative possibilities appears to expand with the choice of cremation.

Ash Collection

The physical act of collecting the ashes arguably deepens the sense of separation that began with the cremation process discussed above. The collection of the ashes, after all, marks the transformation of the deceased's body into its definitively changed form for the bereaved, emphasizing the separation between the living and the deceased. Since the ashes, now physically separated from the body, have not yet been buried, scattered, or enshrined, and are stored in a temporary container, awaiting a final decision about their placement, they exist in an in-between state, characterizing the liminal stage. An article examining the impact of burial delays due to COVID-19 regulations confirms that such waiting periods, similar to those experienced by interviewees awaiting the collection of ashes and urn burial, can be perceived as a state of limbo or a prolonged liminal phase.[83]

Once collected, the ashes—now a tangible form—can be integrated into later acts of memorialization, opening up space for ritual creativity in the burial process. The timing of ash collection and urn burial is notably more flexible than traditional full-body funerals, allowing the bereaved to choose a personalized date that reflects their emotional readiness or logistical needs. This flexibility fosters creativity and personalization in the design of the ritual. As one interviewee explained:

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[82] Translated by the author. Transcript 1.
[83] Souvik Mondal, "Living in a Limbo: A Sociological Study of Missing Funerals, Death Rituals, and Complicated Grief in COVID-19," *Illness, Crises, and Loss 32*, no 2 (2022): 228-243, https://doi.org/10.1177/10541373221131760.

"And in our case, it also played a role that my brother turned out to have COVID-19 on the day of the funeral, so he couldn't be there. So it was also important for us to have another formal moment as soon as possible. Actually, yeah, this was it."

This example illustrates how the possibility of delaying the burial allowed the family to adapt the ritual to their needs and circumstances, making the moment more meaningful. At the same time, several interviewees expressed that the waiting period for the ashes could be emotionally challenging, as the gap between death and urn burial often extended the sense of unresolved grief.

Ultimately, the choices surrounding ash collection and timing not only facilitate a gradual detachment from the deceased's former state but also lay the groundwork for the creative shaping of rituals that follow. While this thesis focuses on urn burials, it is important to note that ashes may also be scattered, kept at home, or enshrined elsewhere—each of these choices offering different forms of meaning-making and potential for ritual creativity.

The Urn Burial

The urn burial is an essential and final step in the liminal stage that finalizes the waiting period that is referred to in the previous paragraph. Acts surrounding the burial contribute to the transition, marking the moment when the deceased are integrated into the grave and the cemetery. They are not yet buried, but neither are they alive.[84] Depending on the personal beliefs of the bereaved, this transition may symbolize the deceased becoming part of the natural world within the cemetery ('becoming a part of nature' is discussed by interviewees as well).

The interview data indicate that the act of burial encompasses several ritual practices, including placing the urn in the grave and closing the grave. The bereaved may add personal rituals, such as reciting poems or placing personal items, like flowers, on the grave. These acts demonstrate how ritual creativity helps express the deceased's individuality and allows the bereaved to actively shape the ritual to fit their unique relationship, which both characterize ritual creativity.[85]

The final act of burying the urn itself can be an essential ritual for achieving closure, which is clarified in the interviews. An example is when an interviewee states that:

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[84] Rebecca S. Hall, "Between the Living and the Dead: Three-Tail Funeral Banners of Northern Thailand," *Ars Orientalis* 46 (2016), https://doi.org/10.3998/ars.13441566.0046.003.
[85] Venbrux, Bolt, and Heessels, "Rituele Creativiteit Rondom de Dood."

"The final part, you receive the ashes and want to bury them, and after that, yes, you feel that in a way, that final piece is completed*."[86]*

This quote reflects how completing the burial process helps to conclude a chapter and transition to the next stage of mourning or commemoration, allowing for new forms of ritual creativity

The Urn

The urn plays a significant role in the liminal phase of an urn burial ritual, symbolizing the deceased during the ceremony. It serves as a container for the ashes. In the case of an urn burial, the urn plays a central role in the burial itself. The urn selection process is influenced by both funerary policies—such as, in the case of urn burials in nature, sustainability requirements—and personal considerations, including customization of the urn to honor the deceased. Other forms of ash destinations, like necklaces with ash pendants, might be considered as well, allowing additional options for personalization and creativity around the ashes.

Venbrux and Peelen emphasize the importance of materials in memorialization, highlighting how urns can serve as ritual objects.[87] The interviews suggest that the bereaved may choose to personalize the urn, which can strengthen the representation of the deceased by the urn and is a form of ritual creativity. For example, one interviewee mentioned that they chose an urn made by a friend, which made the urn personal and unique. Another participant emphasized the symbolic value of selecting two identical, self-made urns to represent the unity of their parents:

"My mother was still in a non-biodegradable urn, while my father was in a biodegradable one. Well, I felt that they should both have the same. Yes, they were both our parents, and we thought it was symbolically beautiful to have two, two identical baskets."[88]

As way of making the urn personal, the participant described carefully transferring the ashes into the urns at home and covering them with red roses as a symbolic lid before placement in the grave. This process highlights how personalization around the choice of the urn can carry profound symbolic

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[86] Translated by the author. Transcript 3.
[87] Venbrux, Peelen, and Altena, "Going Dutch."
[88] Translated by the author. Transcript 6.

meaning. By actively creating the urn and interacting with it, the bereaved engage in a form of ritual creativity, with the urn reflecting both the deceased and the bonds they shared in life.

The Memorial Sign

After the burial, the grave is typically covered with an engraved slice of wood as a memorial sign, marking the conclusion of the urn burial. Meanwhile, the sign continues to play a role in later ritual acts of memorialization. The engravings are often designed to reflect the identity of the deceased, symbolizing how the bereaved wish to honor the deceased.[89] Since the bereaved design the memorial sign for the burial and it becomes part of ongoing commemoration practices, it plays a role in both the liminal stage and the stage of incorporation. However, the act of choosing and designing the memorial sign aligns more closely with the liminal stage, as it occurs before the final ritual closure and since placing the sign on the grave is the final action of the urn burial. Its role after the burial is further explored in later discussions on grave visits.

Ritual creativity regarding the memorial sign appeared in an interview when a participant shared how they selected a line from a poem written by their father to engrave on the memorial sign:

"My father wrote a lot of poems, so we had one line from a poem put on it. [...] Let's see, 'As the blossom, love lights up' [...] his partner eventually chose that one. Yeah, we all thought it was very beautiful. My father was really all about love. He was quite lyrical about it, even in his poems. And the blossom branch has always had this idea of new life. Of everything."[90]

The imagery of the blossom, representing renewal and continuity, not only reflects the poetic part of the deceased but also aligns with the natural setting of the cemetery. The personalization of the memorial sign, tailored to the identity of the deceased, demonstrates how ritual creativity can be expressed.

As is shown in the above paragraphs, the period after death, including the urn burial as a final step, forms a phase of transformation, where the deceased's identity shifts from a person of the living world to a person who has a symbolic presence within the lives of the bereaved, while incorporating objects like the urn and the memorial sign which might be imbued with a symbolical meaning, starting to represent the deceased. The symbolic presence of the deceased in the cemetery is continued after the burial, during grave visits.

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[89] Reimers, "Death and Identity."
[90] Translated by the author. Transcript 3.

4.2. Incorporation by Visiting the Grave

Visiting the Grave is the final phase of a rite of transition, which, in the context of Turner's rites of passage, can be understood as incorporation.[91] After concluding the burial ceremony, the bereaved continue their bond with the deceased, partially based on choices made during the earlier preparation and separation processes, incorporating these aspects into the post-burial process. 'Visiting the Grave' can be considered the post-burial stage, as manifested at the cemetery, and shapes the way the deceased are remembered by the bereaved.

Below, the categories related to visiting the grave and associated rituals, identified through an analysis of interview data, will be briefly explained. These categories emerged through a thematic analysis that involved coding and grouping recurring patterns in participants' description. The found categories are: visitor center, grave placements, reflection, talking, being together, connections through nature, feeling and walking. These highlight the diverse ways people engage with the gravesite. The discussion in this paragraph will explore their ritual significance, particularly in relation to ritual creativity, which becomes evident as grave visits evolve into personalized rituals.

Visitor Center

The visitor center can be experienced as an integral part of Visiting the Grave rituals, often marking its beginning or end as it is visited either before or after attending the grave. It serves as a multifunctional facility that supports both practical and ceremonial aspects of burial and commemoration. It provides a space for visitors to pause and engage with cemetery staff for guidance or assistance. Additionally, it serves as an organizational space for arranging funeral services and memorial gatherings. Its role in supporting bereaved visitors and providing a sense of security is highlighted in "The National Cemetery: A Journey Through Design" which examines how visitor center design influences the visitor experience.[92] While interviewees did not explicitly mention design, it might, however, indirectly shape grave visits. According to interview data, the bereaved often engage in activities such as drinking coffee or tea and conversing with employees or fellow visitors.

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[91] Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*.

[92] Lisa Tonneson-McCorkell, "The National Cemetery: A Journey Through Design," *The LA Group Landscape Architecture and Engineering PC* (blog), October 26, 2017, https://www.thelagroup.com/2017/10/26/the-national-cemetery-a-journey-through-design/.

One interviewee, for example, emphasized the comfort the visitor center provides, making regular grave visits more accessible:

"[…] I would still come regularly because the visitor center is here. I can grab a cup of coffee and not feel lost when I'm standing in the rain, wondering, 'What should I do now?' Instead, I can just go inside."[93]

Beyond providing a space for practical needs, the visitor center also facilitates social interaction, which can contribute to the emotional support of mourners. The interviewee also reflected on the importance of having people available to talk to, such as staff, while recognizing the potential challenge of balancing different levels of engagement for employees:

"Maybe I should do that myself and make it clear that I want to talk about it. And it would also be nice if there were people at the catering who are open to that. But this might be difficult because, for one person, a brief conversation is enough, while another might want to tell their entire life story."[94]

By providing a setting for both social engagement and internal reflection, the visitor center influences ritual creativity, allowing mourners to integrate personal meaning into their experience. Whether through quiet contemplation over a cup of coffee, engaging in conversation, or simply finding a secluded space, the visitor center becomes an integral part of the broader memorialization process.

Grave Placements

When visiting the grave, the bereaved may place objects such as flowers as a symbolic act of remembrance. The cemetery requires that all grave placements must be environmentally considerate, ensuring they do not disturb nature or pose harm to animals. This aligns with the ecological principles of the site.[95]

According to Goody and Poppi, flowers can serve as a material offering that symbolizes remembrance.[96] While the placement of objects at gravesites is a familiar ritual in cemeteries, it also

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[93] Translated by the author. Transcript 5.
[94] Translated by the author. Transcript 5.
[95] "Mag ik bloemen op een natuurgraf leggen?," *Natuurbegraven Nederland*, accessed March 19, 2025, https://www.natuurbegravennederland.nl/vraag/mag-ik-bloemen-op-een-natuurgraf-leggen/.
[96] Jack Goody and Cesare Poppi, "Flowers and Bones: Approaches to the Dead in Anglo-American and Italian Cemeteries," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36, no. 1 (1994): 146–75, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500018922.

allows for personalization and the integration of natural elements. The act of placing objects at the grave enables the living to maintain a personal connection with the deceased. Interviewees mentioned selecting flowers that held significance during the deceased's life, such as their favorite flowers, as a way to personalize this ritual. One participant, for example, made a deliberate choice in selecting flower colors based on the deceased's preferences:

"No yellow. She didn't like that."[97]

Another aspect that influences the choice of flowers at the Schoorsveld cemetery is the placement of flowers that are eaten by deer, integrating the ritual of placing flowers with their natural surroundings. This aspect was discussed by three of the interviewees. Additionally, permitting only nature-friendly grave placements may influence how rituals are performed around the grave. While these rules aim to preserve the landscape, they may also place constraints on ritual creativity. Most interviewees did not perceive these restrictions as significantly limiting their ability to engage in meaningful mourning practices. However, one participant noted that her mother-in-law felt restricted by the prohibition on placing non-biodegradable objects, such as photographs, at the grave.

In addition to selecting specific flowers and materials, several interviewees described creating special flower placements during their visits, such as positioning flowers in a circle around the grave. This practice introduces a creative element to the ritual, allowing for personal expression and meaningful engagement with the grave. Various forms of personalization were evident, demonstrating the presence of ritual creativity: participants noted that they place flowers in a particular way for specific occasions, such as birthdays, symbolizing an ongoing celebration of the deceased's life. Some also mentioned drawing inspiration from the floral arrangements left by others, as one interviewee described:

"I often place them around the tree trunks. It's interesting to see how others do it as well. When I notice something nice, I think: oh yes, that's a good idea; we'll do that next time as well."[98]

Other visitors can, thus, inspire ritual creativity as well.

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[97] Translated by the author. Transcript 4.
[98] Translated by the author. Transcript 4.

Reflection

Several interviewees refer to the act of reflecting at the grave site. Research suggests that incorporating natural surroundings into mourning rituals, such as through meditations and reflections, can stimulate a sense of peace and acceptance.[99]

The grave offers a place for the bereaved to reflect on the deceased's life. The natural world is sometimes incorporated into this experience as well: natural surroundings, for instance, are said to contribute to a feeling of peace, which may also contribute to the integration of the deceased's identity into the natural world. The incorporation of natural surroundings, which connects the deceased to nature, can be considered a creative practice. One interviewee described the experience of reflection and immersion in nature:

"It is spacious. I just really enjoy being alone for a moment. […] I also mean, I'm just, for a moment, really one with nature and my own thoughts. Yeah, I think I describe it well this way."[100]

This quote illustrates how the bereaved uses reflection in nature as a means of finding solace, underscoring the manifestation of ritual creativity in grave visits through moments of contemplation.

Talking

Research indicates that speaking to or about the deceased while visiting the grave integrates the deceased's identity into the lives of the living.[101] By sharing thoughts, memories, and experiences with the deceased, interviewees create personalized rituals that reflect their own emotional needs and perceptions. One participant shared:

"I discuss things that happen in my life, things I can no longer share with her."[102]

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[99] Jessica Lee Curran, *From Mourning to Meditation: Theorizing Ecopoetics, Thinking Ecology* (PhD diss., Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, NY, 2012) https://dspace.sunyconnect.suny.edu/items/123971ed-2e88-4658-8a26-cc90a8a09de9.

[100] Translated by the author. Transcript 6.

[101] Jocelyn M. DeGroot, "A Model of Transcorporeal Communication: Communication Toward/With/to the Deceased," *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying* 78, no. 1 (November 1, 2018): 43–66, https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222816683195.

[102] Translated by the author. Transcript 5.

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This demonstrates how the bereaved might personalize grave visits by talking at the grave, showing the presence of ritual creativity. Another interviewee similarly emphasized the act of verbally engaging with the deceased, explaining:

"Absolutely, absolutely, absolutely. Yes, I always tell everything, including what's going on at home or things like that."[103]

Through these verbal interactions, the grave visit becomes an active ritual practice shaped by the mourner's relationship with the deceased. This form of ritual creativity is also evident in how some interviewees use speech at the grave to acknowledge significant events. The same participant, for instance, reflected on their intention to return to the grave to share important news:

"I haven't been there yet to tell her [...] that [...] my grandmother [...] has passed away, so yeah."[104]

This example highlights how the integration of the deceased into ongoing life events is shaped through speaking at the grave, demonstrating ritual creativity. By incorporating speech into their visits, the bereaved construct meaningful and evolving ritual practices, thereby reinforcing the role of verbal expression.

Being Together

Visiting the grave with others can be regarded as a shared, collective experience in remembering the deceased, which strengthens the social connection between the living by allowing them to remember the deceased.[105] Storytelling can be considered a creative, ritual process, impacting ritual creativity at the grave by, for instance, reinterpreting the relationship with the deceased through recollections of memory.[106]

Forms of Being Together that were found in the interviews include sharing memories or together performing one of the ritual acts listed in the other categories, such as arranging flowers. Shaping a

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103 Translated by the author. Transcript 2.
104 Translated by the author. Transcript 2.
105 Hertz, "A Contribution to a Study of the Collective Representation of Death."
106 Catherine Bell, "Ritual, Change, and Changing Rituals," *Religious Studies*, 1989, https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/rel_stud/111.

collective experience through creating rituals together and sharing personal experiences is a form of ritual creativity.

One interviewee described how their family gathers natural materials to arrange at the grave, sometimes involving children in the process:

"I usually keep it very natural, using what grows here. I cut grasses from the garden or take small branches from our pine trees. Sometimes, I let my brother's and sister's children choose; they collect pinecones, and we place them in a ring around the grave."[107]

This example illustrates how collective rituals—such as arranging natural elements or involving younger generations—enable the bereaved to engage in ritual creativity, integrating personal and natural elements into their remembrance practices.

Connection with the Deceased through Nature

The natural surroundings of the grave can help maintain a connection with the deceased and may evoke memories of shared moments in nature or serve as symbols of the deceased. Research suggests that incorporating natural surroundings can contribute to peace, fostering a positive connection between the deceased and the bereaved. [108] Natural elements encountered during grave visits may also inspire the process of ritual creativity. For example, one interviewee mentioned that a kingfisher appeared several times at the cemetery. Combined with the memory of her favorite color being blue, the kingfisher became a symbol of his deceased wife. Natural elements that are encountered in a nature cemetery like Schoorsveld, thus, allow for forming unique, personalized rituals, contributing to ritual creativity.

Participation in IVN (Institute for Nature Education and Sustainability) activities, such as seasonal or informational walks on and around the cemetery, is an example of how individuals connect through nature, as mentioned in one interview.[109] Engaging in nature-based activities within the cemetery's surroundings enables the bereaved to form a deeper connection to the new environment where their loved ones rest. This connection can foster a sense of attachment, as the participant expresses:

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[107] Translated by the author. Transcript 2.

[108] Jessica Lee Curran, "From Mourning to Meditation: Theorizing Ecopoetics, Thinking Ecology."

[109] "Onze activiteiten," *Natuurbegraven Nederland*, accessed March 20, 2025, https://www.natuurbegravennederland.nl/schoorsveld/activiteiten/.

"Interest in nature, gaining knowledge, hearing about it, and yes, also thinking a bit about her, who is resting here."[110]

This highlights how the process of remembering the deceased becomes intertwined with the activities organized by IVN, reinforcing the connection between the deceased and the natural surroundings. As shown in the quote, interacting with the environment through participating in activities can be seen as a form of remembering the deceased. Furthermore, the social interactions that occur during these activities might stimulate reflection upon the deceased and how the grave is visited. IVN activities, as well as other forms of connecting through nature, such as encounters with natural phenomena like animals, may impact the bereaved's perception of the deceased and encourage the development of creative ways to memorialize.

Feeling

Many people experience a range of emotions during memorial practices, such as visiting the grave. Natural surroundings can play a central role in how the bereaved experiences emotions and can even be considered 'therapeutic landscapes' in stimulating feelings of tranquility, mediating between negative and positive emotions related to grief.[111] Feeling was also explicitly discussed by the interviewees as practice at the grave. This involved standing at the grave and simply allowing oneself to feel. These feelings were connected to grief and love, as well as to the peace felt in nature. Interviewees sometimes connected natural surroundings to the emotions they experienced. One interviewee noted that:

"It's just really nice that you can walk to a place where your parents are buried eternally, that you really take the time there—yes, to recall memories or to be sad, just whatever you need at that moment—because in nature, you take more time for that."[112]

This underscores how the experience of visiting a grave is not just about remembering but also about actively engaging with emotions in the present while interacting with the environment. Emotional

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[110] Translated by the author. Transcript 5.
[111] Douglas J. Davies and Hannah Rumble, "Varied Sights and Changing Rites," *Natural Burial: Traditional - Secular Spiritualities and Funeral Innovation* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/rug/detail.action?docID=3003451.
[112] Translated by the author. Transcript 6.

connections formed during these moments of feeling may also inspire the development of new memories or rituals, thereby impacting ritual creativity.

Walking

Walking around the grave or through the cemetery can be considered an act of connection, both with the natural environment and with the deceased who rests within it.[113] By moving around the cemetery, the bereaved can reflect on their relationship with the deceased and the memories they share.

Additionally, according to some of the interviewees, the informality of certain cemetery practices, such as dog walking, makes the space more inviting and fosters a relaxed atmosphere. The calming effect of (dog) walking in nature is emphasized by one interviewee, who said:

"… when I'm walking in nature, when I'm walking here through the cemetery or walking the dog, then it's just quiet. I don't think about anything, and I don't feel alone when I'm in nature. I can sometimes walk through the city, surrounded by 100 people, and feel really alone. But when I walk here alone, I don't feel alone."[114]

This quote confirms that walking, as a personal experience, can be a peaceful and contemplative practice that can be tailored to the individual's needs. This illustrates how ritual creativity might emerge through personal adaptations.

4.3. Overview Results

This chapter aimed to capture the urn burial process of urn burials in nature cemeteries based on interview data and theoretical perspectives about rites of passage and ritual creativity. Ritual creativity emerged as a central theme, expressed in choices made by the bereaved at various stages, from the selection of the urn and grave location to the design of the memorial sign and practices of visiting the grave.

The chapter demonstrates visiting the grave functions as an evolving act of incorporation, where the bond with the deceased is continually reshaped through rituals. The analysis of the interviews

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[113] Jessica Lee Curran,"From Mourning to Meditation: Theorizing Ecopoetics, Thinking Ecology."
[114] Translated by the author. Transcript 1.

revealed several ritual categories involved in visiting the grave. Each of the established practices illustrates how the bereaved creatively personalize their rituals, while, for instance, using the environment and symbolic acts to maintain bonds with the deceased.

Figure 2 integrates the full urn burial process with the components and categories discussed in the chapter. It expands upon the earlier framework presented in Figure 1, which situated the burial process within Turner's three-phase model (separation, liminality, incorporation). Figure 2 deepens this model by linking each phase not only to ritual components (e.g., urn selection, cremation, ash burial) but also to rituals associated with visiting the grave.

All in all, the chapter demonstrates how the urn burial process is shaped by the bereaved, adding to the meaning of the entire urn burial process. Grave visits serve as an ongoing, meaningful practice that transforms mourning into a personalized and creative dialogue with elements like memory, place, and nature.
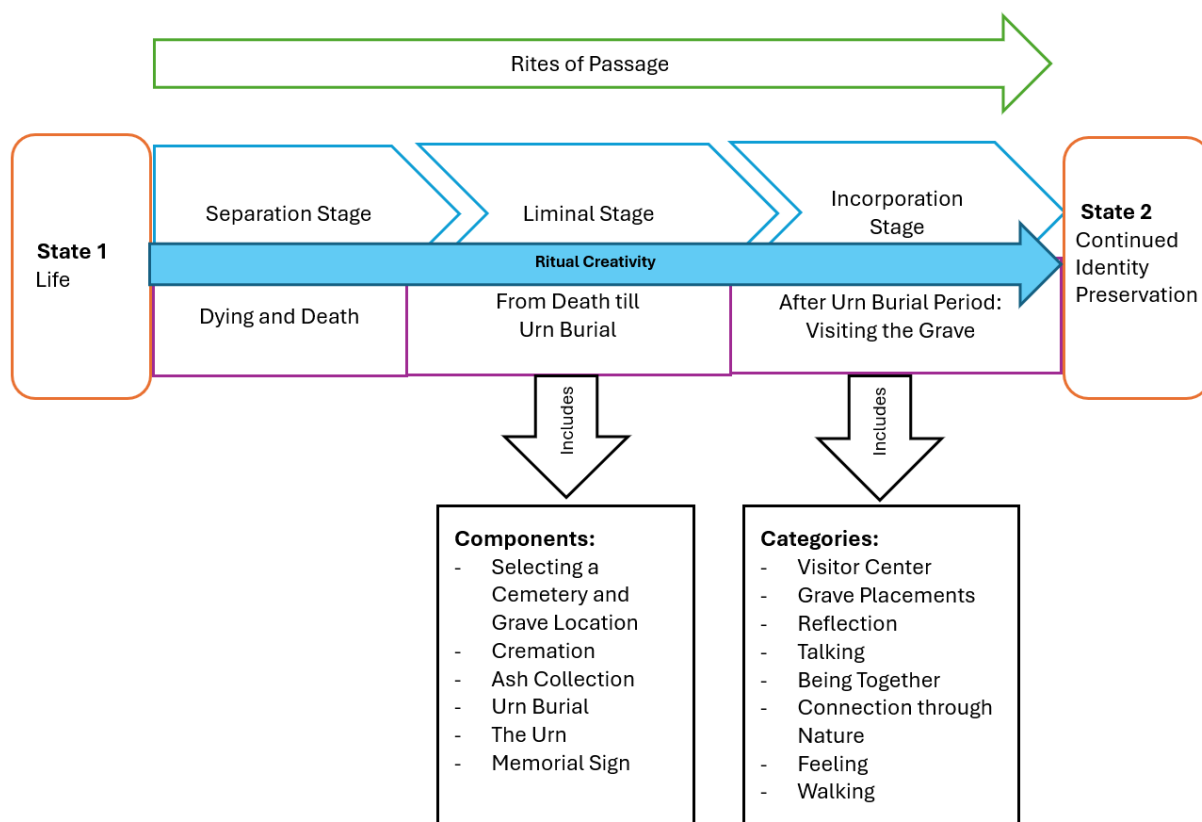

Figure 2: Urn Burial Process Including Components and Categories

5. Identity Preservation Tactics when Visiting the Grave

This chapter examines the identity preservation tactics that emerge during grave visits in a nature cemetery, addressing the question: *What identity preservation tactics can be identified in grave visits in a nature cemetery?*

To identify these tactics, the interview data were systematically analyzed and categorized. Recurring patterns in the ways interviewees described their visits to the grave were grouped into themes that reflect different ways of preserving the deceased's identity. Some of these themes aligned with Unruh's identity preservation tactics, while others extended beyond his framework, leading to the identification of new tactics.[115] This process involved close reading, coding, and comparison of interview excerpts to ensure that the categories accurately represent the experiences and practices of the bereaved.

To better understand how these tactics function, this chapter applies Hermans' dialogical self-theory and McAdams' narrative identity theory.[116] These theories explain how identity preservation is shaped by inner thoughts, conversations, and changing perspectives over time. They help illustrate how the bereaved integrate the deceased into ongoing narratives and dialogues, allowing their presence to persist in meaningful ways.

5.1.   Continued Bonding Activities

The tactic of Continued Bonding Activities, also discussed by Unruh, reveals a remaining connection between the bereaved and the deceased.[117] For the interviewees, this connection is evident in activities such as talking to the deceased or sharing updates about life events when visiting the grave. When an interviewee says:

"Yes, I always tell everything, even what is going on at home..."[118]

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[115] David R. Unruh, "Death and Personal History: Strategies of Identity Preservation," *Social Problems* 30, no. 3 (1983): 340–51, https://doi.org/10.2307/800358.
[116] Hermans, *Between Dreaming and Recognition Seeking*.
McAdams, "Narrative Identity."
[117] Unruh, "Death and Personal History."
[118] Translated by the author. Transcript 2

this shows how, when visiting the grave, the bereaved person continues to communicate with the deceased and keeps them actively involved in her life. The quoted interviewee, for instance, visits the grave to keep her grandparents updated about her life, engaging in a continued bonding activity: an interaction with the deceased that is integrated into the lives of the bereaved.

Other forms of continuing bonds when visiting the grave are for instance, speaking at the grave site and symbolical interactions such as placing flowers or touching the memorial sign. Hermans' theory about the dialogical self helps to understand how bonds are continued by the bereaved.[119] The ongoing dialogue with the deceased can be considered a way of integrating the deceased into the bereaved's internal world. Examples from the interviews demonstrate that the grave is utilized as a site for dialogue in various ways. These dialogues can be explicitly performed at the grave site but may also influence the internal dialogue of the bereaved before and after the visit to the grave. In the example of the interviewee who talks about her life at the grave, she considers it very important to inform them about experiences and changes in her life; she thinks about talking to her grandparents when major life events happen:

"I haven't been there yet to tell her […] that [...] my grandmother [...] has passed away, so yeah."[120]

In this way, she incorporates them in her internal dialogues when processing a life event. The I-positions related to her grandparents, thus, appear to play an important role, and she experiences the grave as a place where she can actually talk to them. Their identities are preserved in her internal dialogue and later expressed through an external dialogue at the grave site.

The interviewee's interaction with the deceased, in the case of the example, functions as a form of negotiation between different I-positions, in which the bereaved self maintains a bond with the deceased as a key part of their identity. The deceased's identity remains a distinct voice in the internal conversation, not entirely absent, but still active and shaping the individual's life experiences. Continued Bonding Activities shape the dialogue and keep this conversation going. In one example, the interviewee describes standing at the grave and touching nearby trees and grass, saying:

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[119] Hermans, *Between Dreaming and Recognition Seeking*.
[120] Translated by the author. Transcript 2.

"I still have the feeling: you're here with me, and when I'm standing there at her spot, I see myself touching the nearby trees or the grass and saying: well, you're still here."[121]

Here is suggested that these acts are not merely symbolic but part of an ongoing relationship with the deceased. The grave is experienced as a tangible object that, in a way, embodies the deceased. These dialogues and interactions at the grave allow for negotiation between different I-positions within the bereaved self. The bereaved integrate the deceased as a voice that shapes their identity and life narrative. The deceased, thus, continues to play an active role in the bereaved's (inner) life.

McAdams' concept of identity as narrative deepens this understanding.[122] The continuous storytelling about the deceased creates a continuing narrative that includes the deceased as a vital part of the bereaved person's ongoing life story, incorporating the deceased's identity into that life story. Experiences at the cemetery can also become integrated into this storytelling as new memories and stories related to the deceased are created. For example, one interviewee described how she and her children actively incorporate the deceased into their daily lives by planning a visit to the grave that mirrors familiar, shared rituals:

"So yes, we are planning to go tomorrow, if possible. I hope the weather is dry enough so we can bring the folding chairs and really sit with him again. The children would like to eat a little cake with him, so yes, we're hoping for some dry weather."[123]

This shows how the act of visiting the grave becomes not only a continuation of connection but also an extension of narrative life, in which the deceased is still a participant. In the case of the example where the interviewee connects with the deceased by touching the natural surroundings, the natural environment becomes an integral part of the narrative that relates to the deceased's identity. Through storytelling and actions such as talking to the deceased, continuing or establishing traditions with them, and touching natural surroundings that symbolize their presence, the bereaved maintain the deceased's presence, thereby preserving their identity.

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[121] Translated by the author. Transcript 5
[122] McAdams, "Narrative Identity."
[123] Translated by the author. Transcript 1.

Ultimately, the grave serves as a site where the bereaved can continue their bond with the deceased through shaping dialogues and narratives through ritual actions that, for instance, involve talking to the deceased, enabling the bereaved to preserve the identity of the deceased.

5.2. Sanctifying Meaningful Symbols

Sanctifying Meaningful Symbols, which is also referred to by Unruh, is another ritual tactic for maintaining the deceased's identity.[124] In this tactic, the bereaved adheres a value to particular objects or rituals that were already connected to the deceased before their death, imbuing them with personal significance after their passing. A recurring example is that meaningful aspects are sanctified by placing them on the memorial sign; the design of the memorial sign is a visible object that is revisited and continues to represent the deceased's identity. One interviewee, for instance, stated that it was important to him that the place of birth was engraved on the memorial sign: this underscored his deceased wife's northern identity.[125] Here, a place that was meaningful to the deceased gained symbolic meaning through the engraving of this place on the memorial sign. These engravings continue to play a significant role in the memorial acts that surround visiting the grave.

From the perspective of Hermans' dialogical self-theory, symbols can become extensions of the ongoing (internal) dialogue between the bereaved and the deceased.[126] Engravements, for example, can be seen as components that shape this dialogue, where the engraved symbols represent and are attached to, for instance, emotions, memories, and words. These symbols are not merely passive markers; they actively engage with the bereaved, reinforcing their connection to the deceased and shaping the bereaved's internal world and dialogue, emphasizing essential elements that represent the deceased. Another example is the incorporation of shared memories in this engraving, for instance, when the bereaved chooses to include a reference to the connection between her parents and an animation video series. She says:

"My parents are called [...] and [...], and in the past, when we were tiny, there was an animation video, a TV series, that was about [...] and [...]...'[127]

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124 Unruh, "Death and Personal History."
125 Translated by the author. Transcript 5.
126 Hermans, *Between Dreaming and Recognition Seeking*.
127 Translated by the author. Transcript 6. Names have been changed to protect the participant's identity.

The internal dialogue about, in this case, the parents of the bereaved continues to be influenced by this shared memory about them, preserving their identity through these memories. The engravings are a continuous reminder of her parents when she visits the grave.

McAdams' idea of identity as narrative can also be applied to this tactic, and internal dialogues are involved in the evolution of this narrative.[128] Ritual acts and symbols become part of the bereaved's evolving narrative about the deceased. These acts and symbols can be seen as narratives (or voices, from the perspective of the dialogical self-theory) in themselves by representing the deceased, adding to the identity narrative about the deceased. During one of the interviews, the location of the grave was considered as acquiring symbolic meaning to the interviewee when she expressed:

"We walk a lot in nature. We do a lot of GPS treasure hunts, so to speak. And because he also got his own coordinates here. Yeah, he thought that was absolutely fantastic, and for us, it's just really fun because it's our hobby, so to speak."[129]

Here, the identity narrative of the deceased is integrated into the choice of this location, connecting the life story of the deceased and the continued identity narrative after his death. When visiting the grave, this narrative develops further: the GPS coordinates associated with his grave are continuously revisited, preserving the valuable memory of GPS treasure hunts.

The tactic Sanctifying Meaningful Symbols highlights the power of symbols and acts around them in preserving the identity of the deceased. In the case of engravings, revisiting them serves as a symbolic act of continuity, preserving the deceased's presence. Sanctified symbols are also involved in acts that occur when visiting the grave, contributing to the ongoing narrative of the identity of the deceased and impacting the preservation of their identity.

5.3.   Incorporating Shared Practices and Memories

The practice of incorporating elements, such as rituals or thoughts, inspired by or based on others in grave visits reflects how individuals integrate external influences into ritual acts and the identity preservation of the deceased. In the interview data, several examples highlight how others inspire the bereaved. One interviewee said:

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[128] McAdams, "Narrative Identity."
[129] Translated by the author. Transcript 1.

"But I [place flowers in a circle] quite often around those tree trunks… You see others doing it like that, too, right?"[130]

This indicates how observing rituals performed by others, such as actions around the memorial signs at the cemetery, shaped rituals during visits to the grave. This phenomenon aligns with Hermans' dialogical self-theory.[131] By adopting rituals observed in others or sharing memories, the bereaved can integrate these external actions into I-positions, thereby expanding their internal dialogue through external interactions with others. For example, one interviewee underscored the importance of external dialogues for his visits:

"With the staff, yes, but with other bereaved people, I have no idea—I just let that happen. But I can imagine that if I start coming here in the beginning, maybe even alone, it would be really nice to have someone to talk to, and I would appreciate it if the staff also spoke to me."[132]

This quote illustrates how acts such as seeking connection with others at the cemetery during grave visits can be important for the internal dialogue of the bereaved. For instance, the bereaved can express internal voices that embody the deceased's identity in an external dialogue. This may help integrate the deceased's voice into the bereaved person's self. Conversations can provide alternative modes of connecting with the deceased and can occur by including others in grave visits.

From McAdams' perspective on identity narratives, the act of including others' acts or stories in the visit to the grave may enrich the identity narrative about the deceased.[133] Each adopted practice adds a new part to the ongoing story about the deceased, sustaining the memory of the deceased. One interviewee shared how revisiting memories during visits to the grave has become a ritual that impacts identity preservation:

"Because then, we just go there, and we mainly go back into our memories. We simply revisit memories; I recently did this with my son as well, asking, 'What do you often think about?' By sharing memories, I believe you can keep someone alive."[134]

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[130] Translated by the author. Transcript 4.
[131] Hermans and Gieser, "Introductory Chapter."
[132] Translated by the author. Transcript 5.
[133] McAdams, "Narrative Identity."
[134] Translated by the author. Transcript 6.

By incorporating collective acts like conversations during visits, the bereaved establish rituals that actively maintain the identity of the deceased in their lives. When the interviewee explicitly says: "By sharing memories, I believe that you can keep someone alive," this shows that she also experiences identity preservation through sharing. Incorporating stories (in the case of the example) or practices inspired by others into the identity narrative enriches this narrative. Identity preservation is, in this way, influenced because new elements are incorporated into the identity of the decead, or because certain memories are emphasized during conversations.

The identity tactic Incorporating Shared Practices and Memories serves as a means of keeping memories about the deceased alive. For instance, practices like telling stories or adopting acts of others demonstrate how rituals can evolve and arise through inspiration and shared experiences. Incorporating external influences also ensures the preservation of the deceased's identity, allowing it to continue within the internal and external dialogue of the bereaved, shaping the identity narrative about the deceased.

5.4.   Creating New Symbols and Rituals

The creation of new symbols and rituals by the bereaved is another identity tactic that was found. In the interview data, the quote:

"Yes, almost every time we bring roses because they told us here that the deer really like them. For the children, that's just super fun. Then, the next time we come, there are nibbled roses everywhere—and yes, we just really enjoy that. So, as many deer as possible visiting daddy."[135]

This describes how the bereaved introduce a new ritual involving roses, which becomes meaningful because of the deer that are present at the cemetery. This new ritual becomes a way of remembering and honoring the deceased, and the identity of the deceased is associated with symbols like roses and deer. This helps continue interactions at the grave site, which also allows the children to preserve their relationship with their dad.

Hermans' dialogical self-theory provides a lens through which these examples can be understood.[136] The creation of new symbols, such as the roses and the kingfisher (see p. 42) and the

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[135] Translated by the author. Transcript 1.

[136] Hermans, *Between Dreaming and Recognition Seeking*.

example below), reflects how the bereaved's internal dialogue with the deceased develops by incorporating new elements into this dialogue: for instance, when one of the interviewees describes that a reoccurring kingfisher at the cemetery started to symbolize his deceased wife:

"[…] sometimes there are unexplainable things. Well, the kingfisher, that's just... I often say, 'It's nice that it's there.' I'm really, really happy with it because, behind you, I see that kingfisher on a postcard again, so yeah."[137]

The roses, linked to the deer at the burial site, and the kingfisher, perceived as a sign of the deceased, demonstrate how I-positions are shaped and created by meaningful interactions with the natural environment of the cemetery. This results in the adoption of new rituals and symbols, which are incorporated into inner dialogues, enriching the deceased's identity preservation.

From McAdams' perspective on identity as narrative, the creation of new symbols and rituals like the ones mentioned in the examples contributes to the bereaved's ongoing identity narrative about the deceased, keeping this narrative alive.[138] Ritual acts, such as placing roses on the grave or interpreting the appearance of a kingfisher as a sign of the deceased's presence, are woven into the identity narrative about the deceased. For instance, the act of bringing roses shapes the identity narrative of the deceased by integrating natural elements with a new symbolic meaning.

The identity tactic Creating New Symbols and Rituals thus underscores how the bereaved find new ways to sustain the memory of the deceased. Acts like the ones given in the examples ensure that the deceased's identity remains preserved and relevant in the bereaved person's daily life.

5.5.   Shaping or Sustaining After-Life Beliefs

Shaping or Sustaining After-Life Beliefs reflects how the bereaved find ways to preserve their beliefs about the deceased's death, triggering questions like 'Where or what are the deceased now they are dead?' For instance, one participant stated:

"At most, that you become one with nature. Being embraced by nature..."[139]

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[137] Translated by the author. Transcript 5.
[138] McAdams, "Narrative Identity."
[139] Translated by the author. Transcript 5.

This expresses a belief that the deceased might become part of the natural world. Visiting the nature cemetery reinforces this belief, as the deceased's remains become part of nature. Similarly, the example of the kingfisher shows the experience of the presence of the deceased after their life:

"Well, the kingfisher, that's just... I often say, 'It's nice that it's there.' I'm very happy with it."[140]

This experience impacts the after-life beliefs about the deceased of the interviewee. Hermans' dialogical self-theory helps to understand how after-life beliefs are (re)shaped after someone's passing.[141] Elements, such as the kingfisher that start to become associated with the deceased represent new I-positions within the bereaved person's internal dialogue. The interviewee expresses a negotiation between widely accepted beliefs and his personal experiences with the kingfisher when he says:

"And more and more people say there is no brain function, and your soul—it's just a chemical in your brain. It simply stops.' But sometimes, there are unexplainable things. Well, the kingfisher, that's just… I often say: it's nice that it's there."[142]

This quote illustrates how the interviewee incorporates a shared understanding of death, where it is viewed as a decline in brain function. It contrasts it with his experiences with the kingfisher in the cemetery. He suggests that while some believe death is simply the end, "it just stops" — unexplainable phenomena, such as his experiences with the kingfisher, challenge this view. His encounter with the kingfisher at the nature cemetery thus shapes his inner dialogue and, with that, his view of death, suggesting that death may not be an absolute end. The deceased is no longer physically present, but a symbolic representation through the kingfisher, which reappears during visits to the cemetery (and on a card during the interview). It might also be associated with I-positions related to his wife in his inner dialogue and might influence his beliefs about the deceaced's (supposed) afterlife.

From McAdams' perspective of identity as narrative, the shaping of after-life beliefs, for instance through inner dialogues after personal experiences, adds a dimension to the bereaved' s narrative about the identity of the deceased.[143] Ideas of where the deceased are now, which may be impacted by experiences in the cemetery, impact this identity narrative. Not only does it impact the identity narrative

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[140] Translated by the author. Transcript 5.
[141] Hermans, *Between Dreaming and Recognition Seeking*.
[142] Translated by the author. Transcript 5.
[143] McAdams, "Narrative Identity."

about the deceased, but the deceased might also become part of a broader narrative about life and death. For example, believing that the deceased's essence is "absorbed into nature" or symbolized by the kingfisher enables the bereaved to incorporate elements into the identity narrative about the deceased. These beliefs help the bereaved adapt their narrative to include the deceased in a meaningful, ongoing way.

The identity tactic of 'Shaping or Sustaining After-Life Beliefs' reveals that the bereaved, when visiting the grave, begin to interpret symbols like the kingfisher or nature itself as manifestations of the deceased, ensuring that the deceased's identity is preserved in a new form of 'presence.'

5.6.   Overview Results

While some of the tactics discussed by Unruh (see theoretical framework, p. 27-28) were found in the interview data, other tactics of Unruh seemed to be absent in the performed interviews.[144] The tactics of Unruh that were discovered in the data related to visiting the grave are (in the order of the most to the least occurring tactic) Continued Bonding Activities, and Sanctifying Meaningful Symbols.[145]
New tactics identified during the analysis are:

1.   Incorporating Shared Practices and Memories: This captures the adoption of or inspiration based on observed behaviors of others (such as other visitors to the cemetery) and the role of memory-sharing as a ritualized act that influences the bereaved's preservation of the deceased's identity.

2.   Creating New Symbols and Rituals: This refers to the emergence of new symbols or rituals that the bereaved associate with the deceased, shaping how they perceive and preserve the deceased's identity.

3.   Shaping or Sustaining After-Life Beliefs: This tactic involves reshaping or sustaining beliefs about the afterlife or about what or where the deceased are during activities related to the urn burial.

These categories were developed because Unruh's existing tactics could not fully account for all the data. Certain significant quotes related to tactics for preserving the deceased's identity fell outside the scope of Unruh's categories. To ensure all relevant data were included in the analysis, new tactics were created based on these quotes.

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[144] Unruh, "Death and Personal History."
[145] Unruh.

Not all of Unruh's original tactics were identified in the data. The tactics Redefining the Negative and Reinterpreting the Mundane were not explicitly found. However, the tactic Reinterpreting the Mundane overlaps with the newly formulated tactic of Creating New Symbols and Rituals. The reinterpretation of mundane aspects often results in the creation of new symbols associated with the deceased. For the purposes of this analysis, the category Creating New Symbols and Rituals was deemed more suitable for accurately capturing the tactics used by the bereaved, as shown in the interviews.

The various identity tactics identified in this chapter reveal several complex ways in which the bereaved preserve the identities of the deceased. Through tactics, the bereaved construct a connection with their loved ones, preserving their identities through the development of I-positions, inner dialogues, and the evolvement of identity narratives about the deceased. Identity tactics reveal that identity preservation is a dynamic interplay between the living and the deceased, in which symbols, actions, and beliefs play a crucial role. By using identity tactics, the bereaved ensures that the deceased remains a part of their life.

Figure 3 shows how the tactics discussed in this chapter can be incorporated in the figure presented in Chapter 4. It demonstrates that the found identity tactics are related to the stage of incoroporation and grave visits, which include the ritual categories discussed in the previous chapter. Therefore, these categories also play a role in identity tactics: ritual categories might be present in identity preservation, and identity preservation can occur through (a combination) of categories. In addition, figure 3 demonstrates that identity is continuously preserved through the identity tactics discussed in this chapter. It shows why the urn burial process matters for identity preservation: involved personalized rituals mark transitions, actively help the bereaved find meaning, and keep the memory and identity of the deceased alive.
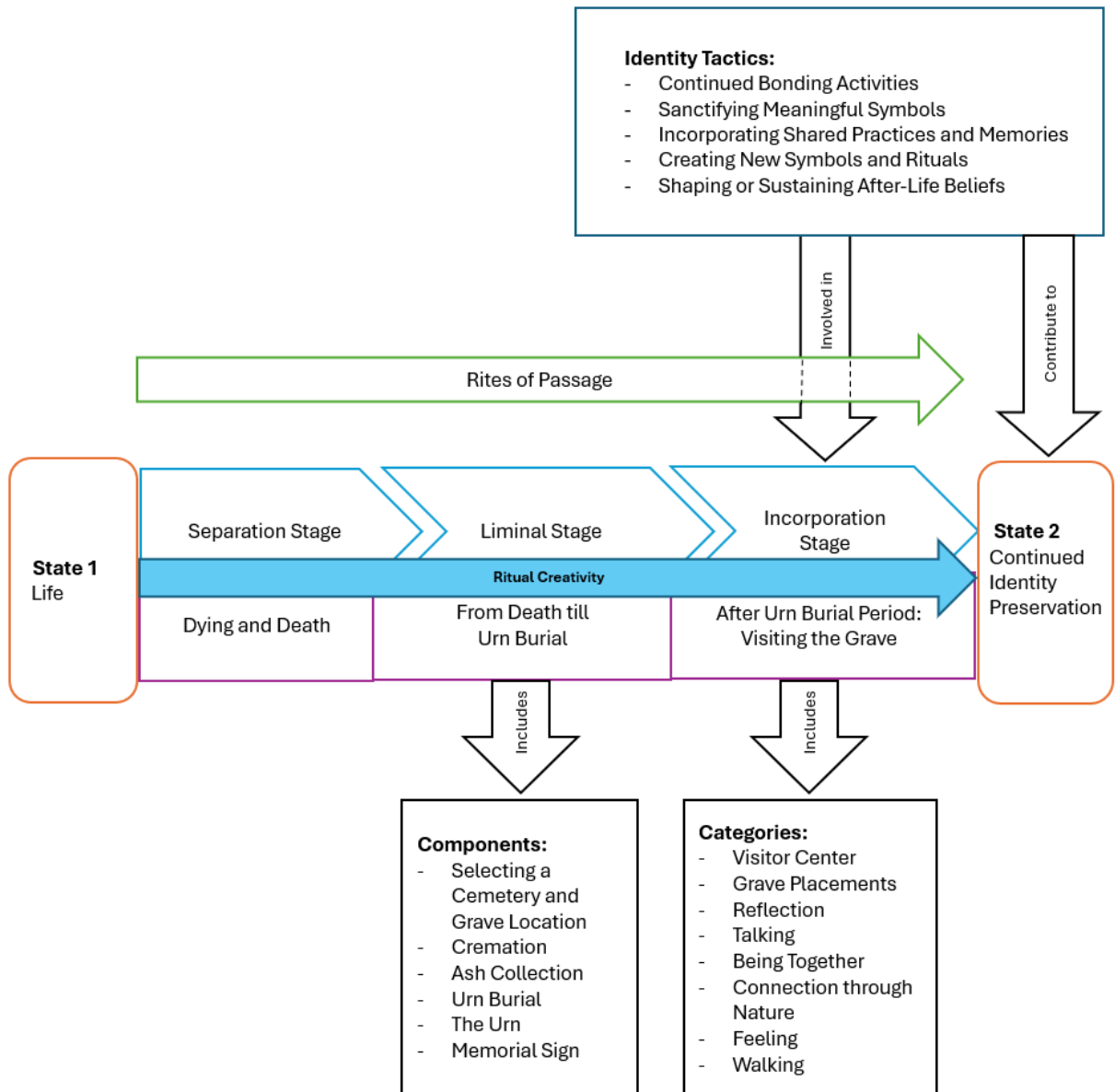
Figure 3: Urn Burial Process Including Identity Tactics

6. Conclusion and Discussion

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the role of rituals around visiting urn graves in a nature cemetery—specifically, Schoorsveld—in the identity preservation of the deceased. It answered the question *How do the bereaved creatively employ and understand rituals around visiting the urn grave in nature cemeteries in the Netherlands concerning the identity preservation of the deceased?*

The analysis of the interview data reveals that urn burial rituals include several components that highlight the transformative and creative nature of the ritual process. In addition, they demonstrate that identity preservation is impacted by rituals performed around the grave, which involves incorporating the deceased's identity into both internal and external narratives. This process involves various ritual identity tactics, inspired, for instance, by natural elements within the cemetery or by personal memories.

Three sub-questions formed subsequent steps in answering this research question:

1. What does the ritual process of urn burials entail, and what is the role of grave visits within this process?
2. What role does ritual creativity play in urn burials, particularly in grave visits?
3. What identity preservation tactics can be identified in grave visits to a nature cemetery?

The first question *What does the ritual process of urn burials entail, and what is the role of grave visits within this process?,* addressed the urn burial process. The urn burial process was illustrated based on Turners framework of rites of passage, which consists of the stages of separation, liminality, and incorporation. Several components of the liminal stage and categories of the incorporation stage were derived from the interview data and placed in a model based on Turner's framework. Components referred to what an urn burial process consists of and relates to 'moments' were choices can be made or options are available to the deceased to shape the urn burial. These components are experienced by everyone who decides to bury an urn at a nature cemetery. Categories, on the other hand, are not experienced by everyone and represent several options that relate to rituals performed around the grave that were discussed by the interviewees: they symbolize possible individual experiences.

The separation stage, which is marked by death and the separation from the world of the living, is essential in the broader rites of passage. However, this thesis specifically focuses on the urn burial process, with particular attention to the incorporation stage, where the preservation of the deceased's identity by the bereaved becomes central. As such, the dying process itself, while acknowledged as part of separation, falls outside the scope of this research. However, the second stage—liminality—remains highly relevant to the stage of incorporation. Elements from the liminal phase continue to influence commemorative practices and ritual acts associated with urn burials, particularly in the context of identity preservation during the incorporation stage.

The stage of liminality represents the transitional period, during which the deceased has not yet been permanently placed in their final resting place. It encompasses all actions taken before and during the urn burial: choosing a cemetery and grave location, cremation, ash collection, selecting a resting place, the urn burial itself, the selection of the urn, and the design of the memorial sign. These components signify a conscious departure from the deceased's presence in daily life and mark the beginning of a transformation. These urn and memorial signs, however, do not exist solely within the liminal phase; they extend into the incorporation stage (involving the urn and sign in grave visiting rituals), underscoring their enduring role in the mourning process.

The final stage, incorporation, is where the deceased's identity is reintegrated into the lives of the bereaved. Visiting the Grave, which is a component within the urn burial process, was argued to be central to this stage, as it consists of multiple categories— visitor center, grave placements, reflection, talking, being together at the grave, connection with the deceased through nature, feeling, and walking —that impact how rituals are created and allow mourners to maintain a meaningful connection with the deceased. While these categories may overlap (e.g., when reflection occurs while walking), they collectively contribute to the creation of post-burial rituals at the cemetery.

The second sub-question *What role does ritual creativity play in urn burials, particularly in grave visits?* was answered through connecting ritual creativity to the established components and categories discussed as part of the urn burial process.

Ritual creativity is evident in each of the components and categories discussed, allowing for individual expressions that adapt to personal needs and social contexts regarding the death of a loved one. The decisions made during the liminal stage involve creative considerations, such as selecting a grave location based on a symbol in the natural surroundings, which not only shape the later stages but also contribute to the personal significance of the urn burial process and rituals that are performed

around these components. Ritual creativity is also explicitly visible, for instance in the personalization of the urn, the design of the memorial sign, and the manner in which the burial is performed.

The stage of incorporation, which included categories related to grave visits, revealed a strong presence of ritual creativity. Each identified category offered opportunities for the bereaved to develop personal rituals. For instance, grave placements were often selected based on the preferences of the deceased, and mourners frequently shared personal memories at the grave site. The memorial sign and the grave's location further illustrate how components from the liminal stage continue to influence the incorporation stage, thereby enhancing opportunities for ritual personalization and creative expression.

The sub-question *What identity preservation tactics can be identified in grave visits to a nature cemetery?* explored identity preservation tactics employed by the bereaved during visits to the grave, focusing on how grave visiting rituals, like the ones discussed in the incorporation stage, contribute to the continuity of the deceased's identity in the lives of the bereaved.

The tactics identified in the interviews include Continued Bonding Activities, Sanctifying Meaningful Symbols, Incorporating Shared Practices and Memories, Creating New Symbols and Rituals, and Shaping or Sustaining After-Life Beliefs. While building upon Unruh's theory of identity strategies, these tactics extend beyond the categories proposed by Unruh, necessitating the introduction of new tactics that suit the interviewees' experiences, including Incorporating Shared Practices and Memories, Creating New Symbols and Rituals, and Shaping or Sustaining After-Life Beliefs. Two of Unruh's original tactics, Reinterpreting the Mundane and Redefining the Negative, were absent from the data. The tactic Reingerpreting the Mundane, however, was partially reflected in the new tactic of Creating New Symbols and Rituals.

The analysis of the discovered identity tactics through the lens of dialogical self-theory and narrative identity demonstrates how the bereaved maintain an internal dialogue with the deceased, preserving their identities through ritual. The tactics show that the process of identity preservation is a dynamic, ongoing interaction, where the deceased's identity is incorporated into both the living's inner world and their external expressions through rituals. By engaging with symbols, rituals, and shared memories, the bereaved not only preserve the identity of the deceased but integrate them meaningfully into their own life narrative.

In conclusion, the results established through addressing the three sub-questions show that rituals around urn burials and urn grave visits in nature cemeteries are creatively shaped by the

bereaved as part of an ongoing process of identity preservation. The ritual process provides options and moments where personal choices reflect the identity of the deceased. Ritual creativity emerges in the personalization of burial elements and the development of individual practices during grave visits. These practices enable the bereaved to maintain a meaningful connection with the deceased. The identified identity preservation tactics demonstrate that the deceased's identity is sustained through both internal reflection and external ritual acts. Ultimately, urn burial rituals in natural settings help the bereaved actively incorporate the memory and identity of the deceased into their ongoing lives.

Discussion

While this study provides valuable insights into the ritual process of urn burials and the role of ritual creativity, methodological limitations must be acknowledged: the sample size was relatively small, consisting of six interviewees. As a result, the findings cannot be generalized to all individuals engaging in urn burials in a nature cemetery. Nevertheless, the data revealed recurring patterns and themes—for instance in how ritual creativity is expressed through grave visits and in the manifestation of identity preservation tactics—that are interesting to further explore in future studies.

Another critical note concerning the methodology of the thesis is that the research focused exclusively on one natural burial site, the Schoorsveld cemetery. While this approach allowed for a rich contextual understanding of one cemetery, it also limits the external validity of the findings. Burial practices and the opportunities for ritual creativity may vary across different cemeteries, for example depending on environmental settings and cultural norms. Future research would benefit from comparative studies across multiple natural burial grounds to examine how context influences ritual behavior and personalization.

The interview data revealed that while urn graves hold significance for the preservation of the deceased's identity, the handling of the ashes can be diverse and personalized. Some interviewees chose to incorporate parts of the ashes in other meaningful ways, which aligns with Mathijssen's theory of transforming bonds. This highlights that, when someone is cremated, identity preservation goes beyond a single grave location. At the same time, the findings of this study show that the grave itself remains a central site of ritual engagement and identity preservation, particularly through creative practices performed during grave visits. Future studies could expand on the relevance of other ritual spaces than urn graves by further exploring how rituals that occur outside the cemetery and include the materiality of ashes, contribute to the preservation of identity and expand knowledge about ritual creativity and identity preservation in contemporary funerary practices.

The ritual process of urn burials encompasses various components, each of which plays a part in the broader process of identity preservation. This research highlighted several of these components, such as the choice of urn and the burial process. While the current division of components suffices for understanding how these components relate to the act of Visiting the Grave, future research could explore the process before the Grave Visits more extensively to identify more components or ritual acts that occur before, during, and after the burial.

It is essential to note that the thesis does not encompass an exhaustive overview of all identity preservation tactics associated with urn burials. Instead, by focusing on the act of Visiting the Grave, it offers a focused and grounded understanding of how nature cemeteries like Schoorsveld support the preservation of the deceased's identity. The identity tactics identified during the incorporation stage not only reflect meaningful strategies used by the bereaved but also provide a conceptual framework that can be built upon in future research. Investigating the process before the grave visits (the liminal stage) in relation to identity tactics could lead to the discovery of a broader range of identity tactics that are also relevant to identity preservation. Examining the presence of identity tactics in contexts other than nature burial sites in the Netherlands and examining identity tactics related to other forms of body disposal, might lead to the discovery of more identity tactics as well. Each bereaved individual, after all, may express unique tactics, influenced by personal, cultural, or spiritual factors. It is, therefore, recommended that future research investigates identity tactics that may emerge within different contexts.

While grief and mourning were not the main focus of this thesis, it is probably a significant factor in how the bereaved preserve the identity of the deceased. The emotional and psychological processes involved in grief and mourning are deeply intertwined with rituals of remembrance, and it would be valuable to explore into more detail how grief interacts with identity preservation in future research. Interestingly, elements of grief surfaced in the data, for instance in the ritual category of 'feeling' during grave visits. This indicates that emotion is implicitly embedded in ritual practices. Although grief and mourning were not systematically analyzed, the findings show how ritual acts at the grave may function as emotional expressions and tools for coping. This research therefore provides a valuable foundation for future studies that more explicitly explore the interaction between grief and mourning and identity preservation.

To conclude, this thesis provides valuable insights into how the bereaved creatively engage with rituals at Schoorsveld Nature Cemetery, primarily through the act of Visiting the Grave. While the focus was on urn burials and grave visits, future research that expands on the materiality of ashes,

investigates other contexts than urn burials in nature using a similar theoretical framework, explores the full range of ritual components of an urn burial in relation to identity preservation, or more extensively investigates the emotional and psychological dimensions would enrich the understanding of identity preservation in contemporary funerary practices.

Additionally, this thesis holds particular relevance for understanding nature urn burials as a new burial practice and for the organization that was the focus of the fieldwork for this thesis: Natuurbegraven Nederland. It highlights how nature cemeteries offer a meaningful environment for bereavement practices that facilitate identity preservation through. By providing insights into how rituals are and can be incorporated into the (post-) burial process, the findings may help Natuurbegraven Nederland further enhance its services to support the bereaved.

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