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Reversing the past: Monuments for stillborn children

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ABSTRACT *In the Netherlands, since the year 2000, over 150 monuments have been established for stillborn children. Drawing on theory-based direct observation of the related death rituals, interviews with the main actors and an analysis of the monuments, this article discusses the role of these monuments in the struggle over the social identity of stillborn children. The significance of the monuments, it will be argued, is to be found in changing perspectives on the social identity and personhood of the unborn child. This article suggests that monuments for stillborn children are a basis for the discussion of former and present ideas concerning stillbirth. Moreover, the monuments effect the social integration of stillborn children into the worlds of both the living and the dead.*

KEYWORDS: stillborn children; monuments; ritual; social birth

A scream. Silence. More silent than ever. Buried without a name. As if you had never existed. After that, silence, no words spoken, forgotten. Silent pain forever, lifelong. But from now on you are part of us. Once your life started in the womb. It was not able to mature. Not developed and yet developed. You are not forgotten. The silence is over. For ever.

(Spoken by a bereaved mother at the unveiling of a monument for stillborn children at the graveyard of Boxmeer in the Netherlands, 22 April 2007).¹

Introduction

The monument in Boxmeer, to which the bereaved mother refers, is one of more than 150 monuments for stillborn children that have been established at Dutch graveyards since the year 2000.² These monuments, which first appeared in Catholic graveyards, are a reaction to the former (Catholic) practice of burying stillborn and unbaptised children anonymously and without ceremony in unconsecrated ground. Against the background of the present approach to stillbirth, parents can see and hold the deceased child, organise a funeral ceremony and purchase an individual grave, former practices are seen as

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disrespectful, improper and wrong. Bereaved parents who are involved in the construction of the monuments demand that the Catholic Church apologise for former 'wrongdoing' and they ask that the existence of their stillborn children be socially acknowledged and their loss respected.

The construction of the monuments offers a site for the struggle over the social status of the stillborn child.³ It exposes the struggle over the limits to the right of existence; the boundaries between non-life and life, between life and death. Former perspectives on stillbirth emerge in the discussion. By means of these monuments the past is reformulated against the background of the present. I call it a struggle because the process of definition is a constant negotiation and an interaction of conflicting perspectives on the existential rights of the stillborn child. By using the framework of struggle, I want to highlight the fact that the social and cultural categories of life and death emerge from the dynamic interaction between concrete people. Although this struggle is not always active but rather an encounter of different perspectives, I see the construction of monuments for stillborn children as a deliberate initiative to debate the social status of stillborn children.

The struggle over the definition of life and death has gone on for decades, but in the Netherlands at present there is a striking increase of interest in stillborn children and the explicit struggle for their existential right. In reaction to the death of Anissa (daughter of the Dutch soccer international Khalid Bouhlarouz), who was born prematurely during the European Championships in 2008, the Dutch soccer team played the next match with black mourning bands around their arms. A few years ago her death would not have received much attention in the public media. Even today, many people have questioned the significance of Anissa's death. On Internet forums, people openly debated whether her death counts as a real death and whether the team's collective expression of sympathy on the death of a premature child was appropriate.⁴

The perception and handling of the death of a stillborn child has changed over the years, but even within one era there is often a lack of consensus on how to categorise these particular demises. Although the monuments appeared firstly and predominantly in a Catholic context, the struggle over the identity and personhood of stillborns to which they bear witness is a broader one. I feel, moreover, that for a full understanding of these monuments we have to locate this phenomenon in the broader societal discussion of the social significance of stillbirth in the Netherlands.

The central question posed in this article is twofold: (1) What is the significance of the nationwide construction of monuments for stillborn children in the Netherlands? (2) What is the significance of these monuments for the social status of stillborn children who were buried anonymously in former days? To answer these questions, I approach the monuments as ritualistic spaces in which the definitions and boundaries of life and death are expressed, negotiated and established in symbolic terms and actions. I demonstrate that the construction of the monuments results in social birth and social integration of stillborn children.

I begin with a brief elaboration of the complexities surrounding the social status of stillborn children and the implications of the term 'stillborn.' Second, I discuss in greater detail the cultural necessity of mortuary rituals for stillborn children. Third, I analyse the process by which the construction of monuments for stillborn children became a nationwide phenomenon. In the fourth section, I elaborate on the significance of the Catholic context of the monuments. Finally, I answer the question of how the construction of the monuments affects the social integration of stillborn children.

The analysis in this article draws on the existing body of literature concerning the socialisation of life and death, and also on anthropological fieldwork. This fieldwork consists of direct observations of the monuments and commemorative services held at these sites, a content analysis of news reports on the construction of monuments, and semi-structured interviews with graveyard administrators, municipalities, clergy and designers involved in the construction of monuments. I also conducted over 40 semi-structured interviews with bereaved parents.

Monuments for stillborn children

The term stillborn [*doodgeboren*], occurs most frequently in news reports and in conversations about the monuments, but it has no clear-cut connotation. Rather, the unstable significance and boundaries of this category point to uncertainties about the boundaries of life and death. Morgan (2002), in an article about controversies concerning the disposal of embryonic and foetal remains in the USA, shows that in the early 1900s the definition of stillbirth was unstable, varying between countries and within one country; but even today, with legally and medically accepted boundaries, there is uncertainty over the social implications of these categories.

Definitions of life and death depend mainly on social and cultural criteria (Kovit, 1978). The processes of 'becoming into and out of social existence' are long, slow transformations (Kaufman & Morgan, 2005, p. 318) which show great cultural diversity (Conklin & Morgan, 1996). The extent to which socialising processes such as birth, feeding, naming, baptism, circumcision, first communion, puberty rites, marriage and procreation are a step up the social ladder differs from society to society. Stillborn children are excluded from the natural sequence of these processes, because their social birth is preceded or at least interrupted at an early stage by their death.

The social status ascribed to a stillborn child depends for the most part on socialisation processes during pregnancy: the degree to which human qualities and personhood are ascribed to the unborn child. Anthropologists in general agree that 'personhood' is a dynamic social category granted to those who meet socially sanctioned criteria for societal membership (Kaufman & Morgan, 2005). The extent to which unborn children possess personhood is a matter of continuous social and political negotiation. The social status of a foetus is central to public and scientific debates on abortion, genetic research on embryos and the legal status of an unborn child when it needs protection from a drug- and

alcohol-abusive mother (Heriot, 1996; Morgan, 2002; Morgan & Michaels, 1999). The development and improvement of prenatal ultrasonic scans has advanced the attribution of social identity to unborn children. Several studies on the impact of ultrasound on the experience of pregnancy show that pregnant women who have undergone an ultrasonic scan report an increased sense of knowing the baby (Black, 1992; Hockey & Draper, 2005; Mitchell, 2001; Williams, 2005). Viewing the baby through ultrasound confirms its identity and existence, the pregnancy becomes more real and the bond between mother and child becomes closer. Parents-to-be involve their social network in the experiences of pregnancy by showing ultrasonic scans and communicating the sex of the child. Moreover, medical developments redraw the boundaries of human existence, which in turn advances the growing social status of the foetus (Williams, 2005). Although the possibilities of anthropomorphising the foetus through technical and medical developments have increased over the past decades, the willingness to grant personhood to a unborn or stillborn child may still be contingent on other factors, such as kin relations and parenting expectations, which have little to do with the ontological status of foetuses or infants (Kaufman & Morgan, 2005, p. 321). The experiences of parents might differ from the perspectives of their social network, resulting in mutual incomprehension. When a foetus or newborn child dies, there is often ‘ambiguity about what, if anything has been lost’ (Rosenblatt & Burns, 1986, p. 237).

If we look at the Netherlands, we see a continuous debate over the definition of stillbirth that depends on the era and on the social context of the demise. Stillbirth in the official definition is a birth of a child of at least 24 or 28 weeks of gestation which does not show any signs of life after birth.⁵ According to medical and legal statistics, the distinction between stillbirth and late miscarriage depends on the limits of viability, which have been pushed over the years from 28 weeks to 26 weeks to 24 weeks of gestation. The boundary between early and late miscarriage is currently set at 16 weeks of gestation. In most cases of late miscarriage, and occasionally with early miscarriage, parents speak of child loss or stillbirth instead of miscarriage, depending on the way they experience the loss. The label ‘stillbirth’ implies a greater social and emotional impact than miscarriage. The official boundaries do, however, have implications for official registrations of birth and death (in the Netherlands the Burial and Cremation Act applies from 24 weeks of gestation onwards) and compensation of funeral costs by insurance companies, which hold to the 24-week boundary. Since 2006, ultrasound research at 20 weeks of gestation is increasingly promoted and compensated by health insurance companies. As a result, pregnancies involving nonviable foetuses are detected earlier, leaving parents with the choice of terminating the pregnancy. Although these pregnancies fall short of the viability limit of 24 weeks, the impact of an induced birth is enormous. Moreover, the fact that in the Netherlands induced abortion is allowed up to 24 weeks of gestation⁶ demonstrates the role of social, cultural and personal perceptions in defining different categories of loss.

Thus the term ‘stillbirth’ as used in the context of the monuments does not have a clear definition. Occasionally people emphasise that the monument is

constructed for any kind of pregnancy loss, as the designer of one of the monuments did:

From the beginning I told the parish board, it is good that they want to do something for these stillborn children of the past. But nowadays, when a pregnancy is lost between 0 and 15 weeks of gestation, the child is not buried at the graveyard. Maybe, if you insist, it might be possible. Those children, too, are to some extent anonymous, they do not yet have a name, are not registered as living people in terms of the law. When you lose a pregnancy within three months, there is nothing left but you did know you were pregnant. The monument is for those people too.⁷

In October 2008, at the revelation of a monument in Hazerswoude Dorp, experiences of grief after a provoked abortion were brought to the attention of those present.⁸ In addition to the monuments for stillborn children, another kind of monument has been constructed in graveyards and at crematorium sites over the past few years: monuments that adorn scatter fields for the ashes of prematurely born fetuses. Some graveyards have both kinds of monuments, and the latter are occasionally also used to commemorate stillborns whose burial location is unknown. Most of the monuments, however, are constructed for stillborn children who died 30 to 50 years ago and who, in those days, were buried anonymously or not buried at all, having been disposed of as medical waste. These monuments are central to my analysis.

A double rite of passage

In her book on pregnancy loss in America, Layne (2003, p. 59) comments on the problem of an uncompleted rite of passage when a pregnancy ends in the death of the foetus. Pregnancy has a liminal status which makes the foetus into a liminal being. This liminality ends with the birth of the child and subsequent rites of incorporation (Layne, 2003, p. 60). Stillborn children are easily excluded from these rites of incorporation. The continuation of their liminal status and the lack of social integration mean that these demises do not count as 'real' deaths. Thus the negotiation over the status of stillbirth is a struggle for the existential rights of stillborn children as well as for the recognition of stillbirth as a 'real' death. That the social impact of a demise depends on the social status of the deceased is an accepted premise in the anthropological literature on death and death rituals (see among others Bloch, 1971; Metcalf & Huntington, 1991; Radcliffe-Brown, 1922/1964; Suzuki, 2000; Venbrux, 1995).

Durkheim (1897/1966), with his famous publication on suicide, gave the impetus for an approach to death as a social phenomenon. The work of one of his students, Hertz (1907/1960), is one of the most cited and seminal works in this field. Hertz focused primarily on the changing relation between body, soul and mourners in the passage from one stage of death to the other. Van Gennep (1909/1960) elaborated in greater detail on those passages from life to death and from death to an afterlife. Both Hertz and Van Gennep have had a major influence on

anthropological thinking and theorising, within as well as outside the field of death. They both demonstrated that the length and intensity of death rituals is determined by the social status of the deceased and, simultaneously, the social impact of their death. The studies by Hertz (1907/1960) and Van Gennep (1909/1960), and other studies on the death of infants and children, demonstrate that for children who are less integrated into society the relatives perform fewer mortuary rituals (Einarsdóttir, 2000; Scheper-Hughes, 1992; Seremetakis, 1991). A growing number of studies on pregnancy loss show that the same is true of the death of unborn children, since these children are often not yet seen as true members of society (Cecil, 1996; Layne, 2003).

The uncertainties about the social status of stillborn children have consequences for the mourning requirements after their death. The absence of mortuary rituals and the treatment of stillborns as if they were not human beings, up to 30 years ago, is a reaction to the lack of social visibility and integration of unborn children in those days. Nowadays, apart from the growing status of the unborn child, parents have more possibilities of incorporating a deceased child into the social community after birth. One of the most important things is to give the child a name, thereby giving it its own identity (Peelen & Altena, 2008). Some parents send out cards, a hybrid between a birth and a mourning card, to give public notice of the existence of their child. Stillborns will never actively participate in social life, but in many ways parents involve others in their loss. By showing their child to friends, relatives, neighbours and colleagues and inviting them to the funeral, they introduce their stillborn child and to a certain extent incorporate it into the social community.

I want to emphasise that the above possibilities are attempts to free the stillborn child from its liminal status. I see this process of social integration as a 'double rite of passage'; double in the sense that social integration into the world of the living (the social birth) and social integration into the world of the dead (the mortuary rituals) have to be dealt with at the same time.⁹ The latter can hardly be processed without the social birth. Parents who lost a stillborn child in former days feel that they were unable to put their stillborn children through both processes. The result is that they experience a social denial of the existence of such a child; both its life and its death are denied.

In interviews parents speak of former practices as painful and traumatic experiences. Mr. and Mrs. Mintink,¹⁰ for example, had this to say:

Mr. Mintink: Our first daughter died shortly after birth in 1968. The doctor arrived and after he had confirmed her death he asked for a small box. I collected one from the barn, and the doctor placed our daughter in the box and took her with him. That was it. We have never been told what happened to her.

Mrs. Mintink: We were young, and because people were telling us that a stillborn child was not worth grieving for, we did not have the guts to ask where they had taken her. After the doctor's visit, the pastor stopped by and the first and only thing he said was, 'What a shame she was not baptised.' Afterwards I was so angry.¹¹

Today's ideas about the 'right' way to deal with the birth of a stillborn child put these former practices into different and predominantly negative perspectives. For Mr. and Mrs. Mintink, the current interest in stillborns and the grief of parents have ripped open old wounds and awakened feelings of grief about how little support and attention they received. For them, as for other parents, this confrontation was the start of their struggle for the recognition of their child's existence. Mr. and Mrs. Mintink took the initiative in the construction of a monument at their local graveyard.

From a local initiative to a national phenomenon

In Reutum, a small town in the eastern Netherlands, the first monument for stillborn and unbaptised children was unveiled on 2 July 2000. The sculpture consists of a big boulder surrounded by a circle of little bushes. A golden image of Mary with her child, as well as a psalm text in golden letters, are attached to the rock. Reverend Kerkhof-Jonkman, who took the initiative in the construction of this monument, tells the story:

It started in 1999 on the evening of All Souls. It was the year preceding the new millennium that gave rise to a discussion about former practices within the Catholic Church. In the parish of Reutum where I worked, we talked about the grief for unbaptised children who have been buried in unconsecrated ground for years. Without saying so to anyone, I decided to do something about it. I had found out beforehand where unbaptised children had formerly been buried. That night we all stood together in the graveyard. I was blessing the graves when I spontaneously decided to bless the area of unconsecrated ground also. You could have heard a pin drop. Maybe everyone was surprised by my action. What struck me most that night was that suddenly an older lady walked from her husband's grave with a candle in her hands towards the spot that I had just consecrated. She placed the candle in the sand. Later this lady told me that she had finally got to know the final resting place of her child. Then I thought: we have to create something, a monument where people can go. A real place, not just a strip of sand. And so the idea developed. Six months later the monument was unveiled.¹²

What started as the gesture of a local priest towards bereaved parents has grown over the years into a national phenomenon. The construction of subsequent monuments has often been initiated by the priest as well, or by bereaved parents or others who are personally involved in the loss of stillborn children.

Without the attention of local and national newspapers and television, the effect of the monument in Reutum would not have been so widespread. Media attention started with some local news reports on the construction of the monument which were sent to the ANP, the Dutch Press Agency. Some days before the ceremonial unveiling of the monument, Reverend Kerkhof-Jonkman was contacted by the national newspaper *Trouw*, which published an article about the upcoming event. Through this article, people from all over the Netherlands were informed about this local initiative and many bereaved parents and other interested parties from far beyond the region attended the ceremony. Even a national television crew from

a current affairs programme called *Kruispunt* was present to document this memorable day.

The significance of public interest in the development of a local initiative into a well-known and prominent event is clear when we consider an earlier monument for stillborn children, raised in 1991. Most people involved in the construction of the monuments see the one in Reutum as the first one but, back in 1991, at the Catholic graveyard in Zwolle, an old gravestone of a nameless child was rehabilitated to memorialise children buried in unconsecrated ground (see also Kok, 2005). Its impact, however, did not go beyond the immediate vicinity of this graveyard.

Although the socialisation of the unborn child had begun before 1991, the effect of these developments on the social status and treatment of stillborn children has been most marked in the last 15 years. For example, the first undertaking firm specialising in funerals for babies and children was established in 1995. My interviews show that, since 1995, it has become an increasingly common practice in hospitals to make footprints and handprints of a deceased child. In addition, hospital staff are more inclined to treat stillborn children as if they had been born alive, and the bereaved parents are treated as father and mother. There is also greater social acceptance for fully-fledged funerals. Thus the public attention attracted by the monument in Reutum, and the rapid subsequent growth in the popularity of this type of monument, is not a coincidence. The monuments found fertile soil to grow in, so to speak: they are part of a wider struggle for the social recognition of stillbirth; a process which, in 1991, had not begun, at any rate, not publicly or generally. The struggle for the social recognition of stillborn babies is not unique to the Netherlands: see, for example, the study by Layne (2003) on pregnancy loss in the USA. In other countries, too, monuments for stillborn children have been erected, but not in anything like the numbers which we have seen in the Netherlands.¹³

The Catholic context of the monuments

Over 85% of the monuments are located at Catholic graveyards. The construction of monuments at Protestant and public graveyards has increased over the past 3 years but their number is still very low. Embedding the monuments in a Catholic context gives a specific character to the discussion over the granting of personhood and social identity to stillborn children. Although church membership and the involvement of Catholics in their parishes have declined over the past decades (Bernts, Dekker, & de Hart, 2007), Catholicism and its traditions are still part of a shared cultural identity. It is this shared cultural heritage that is central to the construction of the monuments. The burial of stillborn children in unconsecrated ground, anonymously and without ceremony, dominates the discussion. The need for a child to be baptised in order to be part of the Christian community excluded stillborn children (who could not be baptised before they died) from the graveyard as well as from heaven. Since the 1960s, most pastors no longer bury stillborn and unbaptised children in unconsecrated ground, and liturgical texts for the burial of a stillborn child were published as early as 1976. In 1983, official reconsideration

from Rome followed these local adjustments. The new Canon Law prescribes that if parents had the intention of baptising their child, the stillborn could have a clerical funeral. In the same way, the abolition in 2007 of the limbo for infants followed changed attitudes that gave stillborn and unbaptised children a place in heaven long before this official date.¹⁴ However, parents depended heavily on local pastors, who differed in their interpretation and implementation of official regulations.

The pain of parents over the former exclusion of their children from mortuary practices and the general disregard of their grief is an important instigator for the construction of the monuments. Whether the Catholic Church is responsible for this pain, and whether the Catholic Church should confess guilt in this connection, is a matter of dispute. There are people who insist that former practices should be evaluated according to the norms and values of those days. They feel that the clergy were not actuated by bad intentions. Others, however, feel that a public confession of guilt is essential. The subject had already been mooted at the construction of the first monument in Reutum. Reverend Kerkhof-Jonkman states that he received little support of from his fellow clerics at first.¹⁵ Many thought that the construction of a monument was unnecessary and that Kerkhof-Jonkman was exaggerating the grief over an old loss. The Cardinal said he would not oppose the initiative but did not encourage it either. In response to the enormous societal reaction to the monuments, Reverend Kerkhof-Jonkman raised the subject of the monuments and the status of stillborn children at the Conference of Bishops. They could not give him an outright statement on the treatment of stillborn children. Some dioceses were even explicitly opposed to a public acknowledgment of the pain that had been caused: they literally said that the church could do no wrong. Eventually Cardinal Simonis visited the monument in Reutum on 28 December 2008, where he openly spoke about the grief of parents, but he still could not acknowledge this 'forgotten' pain on behalf of the Conference of Bishops. At the unveiling of other monuments, people also expressed their disappointment when the pastor did not confess guilt on behalf of the Catholic Church, as in Leeuwarden, where a participant commented: 'I had hoped that the priest would have said at this point: we as the church made mistakes in the past. Unfortunately there was no confession.'¹⁶ Some interpret the absence of a confession of guilt as a continuation of the silence that covered the loss of stillborn children for so long.

The monument at the municipal graveyard in Dongen shows how the construction of monuments for stillborn children has been taken up outside the Catholic context. The municipality's first reaction to a request from Mrs. Delis, a bereaved mother, that they should construct a monument was that the problem of stillborn children was a Catholic issue and it was not up to them to rectify the Church's mistakes.¹⁷ Not only in Dongen but more commonly, the problem of stillborns was seen primarily as a problem of the Catholic Church. However, the studious disregard of stillbirth and the burial of stillborn children anonymously and without ceremony had been a common practice outside the Catholic Church as well. As a result of the discussion in Catholic circles about the treatment of

stillborn children, people started to look at past practices in communal and Protestant graveyards. There, stillborn children had been buried in anonymously communal graves. One grave was often shared by two children. Further monuments are appearing in these graveyards, too, to release stillborn children from anonymity.

Reversing the past

With the construction of the monuments, stillborn children are finally going through processes of social integration. The symbolism of the monuments, and the rituals that are performed, are used to reverse the past. The monuments aim to comply with the need for social recognition of the birth and death of stillborn children whose existence was long denied.

The construction of the monuments is seen as a public acknowledgment of the existence of these children and the pain of parents over their loss. The public character of the monuments is crucial, because it incorporates the former treatment of stillbirth into the collective cultural consciousness (Nora, 1989). Thus the acknowledgment which parents long for is extended in time and range beyond the memory of those people who are directly involved. The public character of the monuments is reinforced by the involvement of a larger social collective in their construction. For example, many parishes raise the issue in their church paper as well as during church mass. Local and national newspapers alike have stimulated public awareness of the monuments. For many families, the acknowledgement of what happened in the past is a first step in the social integration and visibility of their children. As Meyerhoff (1982, p. 119) had already demonstrated, explicit remembrance of the past through the monuments reweaves it into the present and ensures that these experiences are not swept under the carpet. Parents, however, still find that family members and friends are reluctant to speak of their children. The growing public openness gives parents a space to discuss different perspectives on their loss.

The social integration of stillborn children is reinforced by the location of the monuments. In the first place, placing them in the graveyard itself gives stillborn children a visible place among the other dead. The acknowledgment of their death consequently gives rise to an acknowledgment of their existence. 'Our child, who was buried in unconsecrated earth 35 years ago, came alive,' a mother commented after the unveiling of the monument in Reutum.¹⁸ Moreover, the monuments are often located in a central and visible place, which symbolically reverses the former practice of burying these children behind or under a hedge. The designer of the monument in Boxmeer comments on the importance of a central position:

The graveyard administrator had planned to place the monument against the hedge at the edge of the graveyard. I did not agree. Those children have been hidden long enough. I presented my arguments to the administrator and he finally understood that it was better to give the monument a prominent place. Now it is located at the end of the main lane. When you enter the graveyard, you notice it immediately.¹⁹

The symbolic integration is often expressed by the design of the monuments as well. The monument in Neede, for example, consists of five pillars, one of which is broken in the middle. The broken pillar symbolises stillborn children. At the top the five pillars come together again, intimating that stillborn children can finally enter the community of believers, the world of the children and the world of the dead.

This symbolic process of integration is reinforced by the unveiling ceremony, which is reminiscent of a true funeral and thus acknowledges stillborn children as deceased human beings. Mrs. Mintink's description of the inauguration of 'their' monument supports this interpretation:

It was a very memorable day. We invited many relatives, because we wanted to involve them in our loss, something we couldn't do 38 years ago. It started with a church ceremony. Afterwards we walked in silent procession to the graveyard, where the monument was waiting. Everyone was holding a white rose. At the graveyard, the pastor consecrated the monument and the flower arrangements and the white roses were placed at the foot of the monument. After the ceremony there was coffee and tea and everyone received a commemoration card with a photo of the monument and a poem.²⁰

The church ceremony, the silent procession, the flowers, the priest's blessing, the refreshments afterwards and the commemoration card are elements that we find in a regular (clerical) funeral as well. This ritual farewell to stillborn children evokes emotions which parents have never before been able to express publicly. The ceremony turns the physical death of a stillborn child into a socially recognised death.

In Neede, the funerary character of the inauguration was supplemented by elements of baptism, like the incorporation of children into the community of believers and their consecration. During the church ceremony the pastor showed a baptismal gown and related how an older lady had given him this gown at the beginning of the mass. The lady had borne several children but none of them survived. The gown had been hanging in the closet for more than 60 years without ever being used. At the graveyard the baptismal gown was placed on top of the monument and the priest consecrated both, by which he affirmed that stillborn children will always be part of the community and always welcomed by Jesus and God. Both the construction of the monument and the unveiling ceremony relate to consecration and incorporation in retrospect, which in turn effect a reversal of the former exclusion of stillborns.

Conclusions

The granting of social identity to a newborn person is a gradual process that follows cultural and social norms. Stillborn children are easily excluded from these developments, because the socialisation process takes place mainly after birth. When a child dies around the time of birth, therefore, there is ambiguity about the social significance of life and death. In the past few decades, medical,

technological and societal developments have influenced the prenatal social recognition of unborn children. Along with postnatal integration rituals and those of death, their demise comes to count as a 'real' death. In the context of these developments, former practices, such as the exclusion of stillborn children from mortuary practices and the denial of parental grief over these losses, are being re-evaluated. Nowadays these practices are seen as wrong and as aggravating the pain of bereavement. The significance of the construction of over 150 monuments for stillborn children in Dutch graveyards lies in the confrontation of conflicting perspectives on stillbirth. Although the monuments have appeared predominantly in Catholic graveyards, discussion about the social significance of stillbirth is more general.

This paper has emphasised three meanings conveyed by the monuments. First, they offer a site for the struggle over the social identity of stillborn children and the recognition of their deaths as 'real' deaths. Second, the monuments as public sites are a social acknowledgement of former wrongdoing. Third, the monuments reverse the past. Former practices are characterised as acts of exclusion; denial of the existence of stillborns, exclusion of stillborns from the graveyard and from heaven, denial of the parenthood of the bereaved parents, and the absence of socially acknowledged mourning. The monuments bring about the integration of stillborns into the world of the living as well as the world of the dead, a process which I have called a double rite of passage.

'The silence is over.'²¹

Notes

- [1] My supervisor Prof. Eric Venbrux kindly attended the occasion and handed his recordings to me. Like other direct quotations of comments freely translated from Dutch, this has been edited.
- [2] This number includes all constructed memorials to stillborn children that have been buried in anonymous graves in the past. It excludes monuments that mark recently allocated scatter and burial plots for stillborn children.
- [3] For this specific approach to the monuments I sincerely thank the anonymous referees, who with their detailed critical comments on an earlier draft helped me to look at my data from this specific analytical perspective.
- [4] www.sportwereld.nl/voetbal/nederlandselftal/2383092/Fans_leven_mee_met_Sabia_en_Khalid.html. Retrieved June 23, 2008. http://extra.volkskrant.nl/opinie/artikel/show/id/842/Het_drama_Boulahrouz. Retrieved June 23, 2008. http://forum.viva.nl/forum/list_messages. Retrieved June 23, 2008.
- [5] <http://statline.cbs.nl/StatWeb/publication/?DM=SLNL&PA=37422NED&D1=19-22&D2=0,10,20,30,40,50&VW=T>. Retrieved June 23, 2008.
- [6] <http://www.minvws.nl/dossiers/abortus/>, accessed on 5 September, 2008.
- [7] Personal communication with D.S. (17 August 2007).
- [8] I did not find this public attention for provoked abortion in the context of the monuments before. The revelation of the monument in Hazerswoude-Dorp took place right at the finishing of this article. Additional research is needed to tell more about the motivations of the initiators to include provoked abortion in the commemoration.
- [9] For another case of double rites of passage on the occasion of death, namely death-marriage, see Venbrux (1991).
- [10] Many interviewees insisted on using their true names rather than pseudonyms, because the appearance of their story in a public journal is part of their struggle for the social recognition of the existence of stillborn children. In cases where this request was not explicit, I used initials.

- [11] Personal communication with Mr. and Mrs. Mintink, initiators of the monument in Groenlo (29 August 2009).
- [12] Personal communication with Reverend Jan Kerkhof-Jonkman (25 June 2006).
- [13] A brief search on the Internet led to the discovery of two monuments in Australia, established in 2002 and 2006, some monuments in the UK, constructed in the past 3 years, and several monuments in Germany, the first of which was established in 2004.
- [14] On 19 April 2007, with the consent of Pope Benedict XVI, the International Theological Commission published a report announcing the abolition of the hypothesis of a limbo for infants. According to this hypothesis, children who died without baptism were not freed from original sin and were therefore excluded from heaven. However, since they had not yet committed any personal sins, their exclusion was restricted to this limbo: a separate state but one of happiness rather than hell.
- [15] Personal communication with Reverend Jan Kerkhof-Jonkman (25 June 2006).
- [16] Walinga, R. (2003). Erkenning voor levenloos geboren baby's. *Friesch Dagblad* (12 May, 2003) (translated).
- [17] Personal communication with Mr. and Ms. Delis, 7 November 2007. Interview with Municipality of Dongen, (7 November 2007), (22 May 2007).
- [18] Quotation from the guestbook of the Catholic Church in Reutum.
- [19] Personal communication with M.v.U. (3 May 2007).
- [20] Personal communication with Mr. and Mrs. Mintink, initiators of the monument in Groenlo (29 August 2009).
- [21] See the citation at the beginning of the introduction.

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