Are you there, family spirit? Integrating "organisational ghosts" into the strategic practices of family businesses

By Hervé Colas,
Conservatoire national des arts et métiers (CNAM), Groupe CHD
and Antoine Souchaud,
NEOMA Business School, Centre de recherche en gestion (i3-CRG), École polytechnique,
Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS), IP Paris

This paper describes and analyses how a leader of a family business secured its independence and future by tapping into the literature on (i) the phenomena of the lingering "presence" of founding leaders after their death, (ii) the concept of commemorative rituals and (iii) other specific forms of organisational remembrance. From a theoretical standpoint, this paper confirms the typology put forward by Bazin and Leclair (2019) on "organisational ghosts", and goes further by examining strategic practices integrating this concept and the literature that inspired it. From a managerial perspective, this paper serves as a useful reference point for all leaders, especially those of family businesses, who coexist with the traces and "ghosts" of their deceased predecessors. This paper shows that the latter can represent an intangible asset that the organisation can integrate concretely into its strategic practices.

In a family business, the leader's death is a time when filial ties as well as the continuity and legitimacy of managerial power have to be secured. The business thus begins a phase in which, more or less imperceptibly, the late leader's presence still lingers over it. It is a tense period of time during which the company's future may be at stake and the late leader sometimes seems to return through symbolic manifestations in the organisation's life, so as to assist and lend legitimacy to the handover of managerial power.[1]

For the case study presented in this paper, we used an autoethnographic approach with an outside observer to explore the experiences of a man who took over his family's 500-employee accounting firm after two successive unexpected deaths in the family. His early days at the helm of the firm were shaped by different symbolic manifestations of his father and brother, both of whom had died. Initially taking him by surprise and manifesting in the form of traces, pictures, desires and ideas that seemingly clung to him, these symbolic manifestations were in part channelled, and even deliberately worked into various organisational rituals and strategic practices.

Accordingly, this case study enables us to develop our thinking about the role and workability of integrating symbolic "ghosts" into the handover process of a family business after the founder's death.

After a brief review of the literature and a description of the methodology used, we will present our findings followed by a discussion of their impact and a conclusion.

Overview of main tools to analyse the phenomena of the lingering "presence" of late leaders described in the literature

The literature calls on us to use conceptual tools to analyse the phenomena of the lingering "presence" of founding leaders after their death. This complex analytical exercise also draws on the concept of commemorative rituals and other specific forms of remembrance.

---

[1] This article was translated by the Translation Center of the French Ministry of the Economy, Finance and Industrial and Digital Sovereignty.

The literature calls on us to use conceptual tools to analyse the phenomena of the lingering "presence" of founding leaders after their death

Described in the literature as a theoretical concept, "organisational ghosts" can serve as a tool to analyse how actors who are physically absent haunt "the relations and struggles of the [organisation's] present" (Orr, 2014).

Originating in the field of social sciences in the work of Derrida (1993), who develops the concept of spectrality in *Specters of Marx*. According to Derrida, we should try to seek out, not run away from, the "ghosts" which haunt us. Establishing an artefact of dialogue with a "ghost" may be a challenging undertaking, but it allows the haunted to work on themselves, explore the meaning of their existence and see their own life and actions through the useful lens of an ethical imperative which inhabits them while also transcending them.

Bazin and Leclair (2019) recently contributed their own understanding of the concept of "organisational ghosts". These authors underscore the unique reality of "spectral figures" in businesses. They develop an interpretative framework outlining these many, complex and ambiguous figures by way of the "epistemic ghost conveying an untold secret" and the "ethical spectre embodying an otherness to be embraced" (Bazin & Leclair, 2019). While the ghost figure serves as a conduit for posing scientific questions about an organisation's unspoken aspects and enigmas from the past, the spectral figure helps to question the ethical foundations of a business's actions in the organisation's present. Bazin and Leclair also encourage our scientific community to show a keener interest in the manner in which leaders learn to coexist with such "ghosts". In particular, they emphasise the need to approach the concept of "organisational ghosts" with neutrality, in the same way that you would approach a mere analytical tool. "By turns individual and collective, manipulative and manipulated, looking back on the past and to the future, ghosts reveal themselves to be a potentially powerful tool for analysing organisations. Moreover, learning to encounter them – to tango with them – can enable actors to put down deeper roots in their organisations and make their practices more meaningful" (Bazin & Leclair, 2019).

Among these "organisational ghosts", the late founder is of particular importance, especially in the context of a family business. When a founder dies, they leave behind traces, rituals and stories which survive them. As another paper puts it, "the death of the founder of an organi[s]ation is believed to produce a unique opportunity to understand the myth constructed around the creation process" through forms of posthumous manifestations (De Brito, Da Silva & De Jesus Muniz, 2010). Organisational researchers only very rarely engage in the study of such manifestations.

This is likely due to both the fact that these arenas are not very accessible to organisational researchers and that the study of such phenomena inevitably elicits major pushback from other people. In his book *Patron de droit divin*, Roger Martin recounts how a manuscript he wrote in May 1954 about Camille Cavallier, who ran a company in Pont-à-Mousson, France before he died in 1926, was "buried" because it offended the late businessman's family and made the company uneasy (Martin, 1984, pp. 165-169). Another illustration of the problems that can arise when writing and publishing work on this subject is that of issue 7 of the French management journal *Gérer et Comprendre*, which contains the introduction to a book about Louis Renault followed by a note from the editorial board calling on a publisher to release the book in its entirety (Séjournet, 1987). The work ended up being published, but notably left out the thorny topic of posthumous manifestations of late leaders (Séjournet, 1988).

In an effort to overcome these difficulties, bring an end to such silence and fill the void in the literature, we draw on the literature covering commemorative rituals and other specific forms of remembrance.

This analytical exercise also draws on the concept of commemorative rituals and other specific forms of remembrance

As Bell, Tienari and Hansson observed in 2014, relatively little research has delved into the commemorative practices of organisations, while that regarding commemorative rituals is even more limited. Studies have examined the commemorative portraiture of late leaders and organisations' commemorative places dedicated to them (Cutcher, Dale & Tyler, 2019). But if we want to deepen our understanding of the concept of commemorative rituals for late leaders, we have to look to anthropology.

The field of anthropology defines a commemorative ritual, to cite Saint Augustine, as "a present of things past". It provides the current generation with an opportunity to spend time with their predecessors. A ritual is, more specifically, a "process of regeneration, a necessary restructuring at regular intervals, in order to reintegrate individuals and the community into the melting pot of their history, their memory, and their founding ideals" (Lardellier, 2019). A ritual's role "is to mobili[s]e a more or less fluid and open-textured network of ordinary commonsense beliefs in order to build logically and factually impossible worlds that are readily conceivable, memorable, and transmissible" (Atran, 2002). Rituals involving the delivery of a speech can lend legitimacy to the speaker by reminding the audience of the origin of the speaker's power (Bourdieu, 2014). A classic essay by Pierre Clastres (1974) also points out the connection between power and speech in his anecdote about the "prolixity" of the Indian chief who narrates stories about the tribe's ancestors. Rituals can specifically involve "ghosts", especially in the context of religious rituals (Boyer, 1994; Sperber, 1997; Smith & Stewart, 2011).

This connection between power and speech is linked to the concept of "numen", which for anthropologists designates "a transcendent force which can incarnate itself in certain individuals (priests, sorcerers, sovereigns, etc.), imbuing them with some great power or special gifts", including the power to evoke the dead (Lardellier, 2011).

At the time of the handover of a family business, would "numinous" successors not be able to evoke, or even "invoke" the deceased so as to make them "visible" to each person during commemorative rituals, and even go as far as integrating them in the context of specific strategic practices?

In the next section of this paper, we will discuss a case study of one such utilisation of a late leader during the handover of a family business.

Overview of case study and methodology: an autoethnography involving a family business and an outside observer

This case study involves a man who unexpectedly became the leader of his family's accounting firm after a series of deaths in the family. The methodological approach of this case study is that of a co-produced autoethnography with an outside observer, and it draws on a rich and diverse variety of materials.

Case study overview
On 26 January 2017, the 85-year-old founder of a family-owned accounting firm with more than 500 employees and whose main line of business was advising start-up entrepreneurs, died. Only one of his children, a son, survived him. It thus fell to the son to keep the family business going and pass it on to another generation further down the line. This son is the lead author of this paper. He had branched out of the family business to lead a different career. Since his takeover of the firm, he has had unexpected encounters with traces of the life of his father and brother, which he documented. At first these encounters thoroughly disconcerted him. At the same time, he gradually started to sense that the firm's stakeholders seemed to view him as able to evoke the deceased and to speak in the name of the firm's "ghosts", similar to a lesser form of "numen". Taking on this ascribed role – and in order to consolidate his legitimacy – the "surviving leader" decided to organise an event in honour of his father that would celebrate what he dedicated his career to: helping and advising entrepreneurs. The idea was also to show the firm's clients and competitors that it, too, had survived the death of its founder. The event took the form of a pitch competition with a top award of €30,000 named in honour of the "ghost". This commemorative event involved over six months of planning. Employees, along with the firm's long-standing clients and collaborators were invited to attend.

Methodology and data collection and analysis
This paper is a co-produced autoethnography with an outside observer/co-author (Kempster et al., 2008; Herrmann et al., 2013). The lead author heads up the business he inherited after his father's death. He documented this period of his life in a journal he kept for four years. The lead author asked the co-author to take part in the case study, tasking him with observing the firm's organisational dynamics and conducting interviews. This participant observation lasted three years and involved keeping a journal and interviewing the firm's partners, employees, clients and collaborators. These interviews were transcribed. Additionally, the co-author visited the firm's various offices and had an immersion experience at one of them. The planning of the pitch competition and the gala night itself involved recordings that were fully transcribed by the co-author.

These relatively rich and diverse materials were read several times in full by the co-author/observer. These readings were done without notetaking or prior bibliographic research. The idea was to practice "evenly suspended attention", a listening technique described by Dumez (2013) as a useful way to avoid the risk of circularity. The theme of manifestations and rituals connected to the late founder emerged from this phase of evenly suspended attention led by the co-author/observer. Both authors met regularly to discuss this experience and the theme, holding confirmatory interviews where observations made during the evenly suspended attention phase could be further clarified.

Findings

We have broken down our findings into three narrative stages. In the first, we see how the successor gradually realised that the family firm's stakeholders viewed him as having the power to evoke the late leader. In the second, the successor got involved in organising a special commemorative ritual, as he took seriously others' belief in his ability to evoke his deceased family members. Lastly, this ritual led people to talk about their memories of the late founder and revealed the existence of another, hidden family "ghost", whose presence brought about the firm's existence.

The successor gradually realised that the family firm's stakeholders viewed him as having the power to evoke the late leader
The fate of the current leader of the firm was sealed when two members of his family died one after another. "My father passed away and so did my two brothers. Everyone who had led the organisation was dead. Except me. I'm the only survivor, along with my mother, who was acquainted with the firm's entire history" [Hervé Colas]. When he took up his late father's role, it was not the logical conclusion to a deliberate ambition, but his submission to a form of fate, without him having a choice in the matter (*nolens volens*).

At first the firm's deceased "haunted" him through survivor's guilt. "My brother Bruno's presence, which I sensed when I looked at his paintings, his pens and

his office things, came to 'unsettle' me in the form of survivor's guilt" [Lead author]. The deceased family members seemed to haunt symbolic places such as the offices they worked in when they were alive. "It was incredibly hard for me to sit down in my brother's chair and at his desk. No other office was free when I returned. The office had become a mausoleum since no one had dared to clean it out after my brother died. When I found handwritten notes dating after his death, I realised that my father would come sit in his chair, almost as if he wanted to bounce ideas off Bruno, as was his habit…" [Hervé Colas].

Certain seemingly insignificant objects stirred meaningful memories and emotions. "When my father died, I noticed that he kept a yo-yo and a little wooden spinning top in his desk drawer. It's something I mentioned at his funeral service as a sign of his playful and simple way of approaching life. A short time later, while visiting one of his close partners, I saw that he also had a little wooden spinning top on his desk… Seeing me look at the spinning top, Alain said to me: 'Yes, Jean-Claude [Hervé Colas's father] gave it to me, and I play with it when I'm on the phone'" [Hervé Colas].

Little by little, the newly minted leader began to realise that he himself was, in the eyes of other members of the firm, able to create symbolic connections with his late father and brother. "Sometimes I emphasise my physical similarities with my father, as I'm built like him and our faces are almost alike. I'll wear a hat like he did, which makes the resemblance even more striking… I know exactly what to do if I want to scare Martine and Vanessa, all that's needed is to imitate his way of walking into a room, calling out Corinne's name loudly, etc. There are so many ways I can disguise myself as Jean-Claude if I want to play ghost. I talk about my father or my brother when I don't know what to say and it's absolutely necessary I say something. I let my emotions show and think back to what I said at the convention in Le Touquet when I imitated Bruno while talking about his cigarette and the way he'd tap it against his lighter – which made Virginie, who liked him to bits, cry" [Hervé Colas].

Although he sometimes evoked these memories deliberately, the firm's leader also admitted that he occasionally felt overwhelmed by them. "At times I feel like I'm lending my body to intentions that weren't mine to begin with – as if I'm lending my body to something that doesn't have one. In reality, instead of being the owner of a firm, I'm possessed by ideas and intentions in relation to the firm. I hear a voice like my father's tell me that I have to get the firm to meet such and such revenue objective. And I do it in his place" [Hervé Colas].

Accordingly, the leader can thus be perceived as able to make traces of the organisation's ghosts appear, whether unintentionally or by evoking them or holding rituals. "What I know for sure is that bringing up my father and brother allows me to form a 'bridge', a link, a mimetic connection between my father and me. And this connection is important because it establishes a connection with the past, or to venture even further a connection with another world. When I evoke my father, I'm creating a connection with a world that isn't there

anymore, but which serves as a way to guide me in creating the world of the present. I'm referring to the use of the most basic ritual units – which are called 'ritemes' – and I can combine them based on the circumstances. I'm a sort of 'organisational ritual tank'" [Hervé Colas].

Taking seriously others' belief in his ability to evoke his deceased family members, the successor got involved in organising a special commemorative ritual

After this slow realisation process, the lead author arrived at the decision to "summon" the "ghost" to a special organisational ritual. It would take the form of a pitch competition and involve the firm's partners for six months, at the culmination of which a gala night would be held and an award named in the founder's honour would be given out.

The competition and its accompanying award were explicitly devised as an offering to the late leader. "I had this idea of making a sacrificial offering so that my dead father would receive a warm welcome from the gods. This idea of a sacrificial ritual has been around for several thousand years" [Lead author].

The competition also provided an opportunity to revive the firm's values by retelling the epic story of its founding and to inspire enthusiasm and confidence regarding the firm's future. "I'd like to say a few words about this award [named in honour of the father]. My dad, a man of modest means who grew up in a small town, built a firm of over 500 people. He sparked an entrepreneurial drive in many. Behind every entrepreneur, there are often role models, heroes, family members and friends who they looked up to. My father was that person for a lot of people: employees, interns, clients, friends and other collaborators of the firm. His encouraging spirit and creative energy contributed to the firm's growth, as well as the growth of a number of start-ups that went on to become leaders in their field. […] We want our gatherings to be opportunities to discuss the firm's future, in order to always be better prepared to face continuously unprecedented or uncertain business environments. We also want this gathering to energise our clients, so that we can forge ahead with an encouraging, friendly and stimulating dialogue" [Lead author, address given at the gala night].

The winner of the competition received an award, which included a cash prize, along with an item associated with the late founder: a spinning top, Jean-Claude's favourite item which he would give out as a gift to his family and friends, an object through which he continued to live on. "When I looked into the origins of the spinning top game, I realised that it had a very rich history and symbolism, particularly when it comes to the game of dreidel Jewish people play during Hanukkah – at the time of the Hellenisation of Judea, when the city of Antioch had prohibited Judaism, the game allowed groups of people to hide the study and transmission of the Talmud. An early form of a basic gambling game, I also saw it as a sort of 'symbol' of the entrepreneurial experience made up of gains and losses. Then there's

the protagonist of the movie *Inception*, who uses a spinning top to find out which layer of reality he is in… yet, our line of business, accounting, is often recognised within organisations as 'reality'. So I had my 'pocket gift' to give out to the pitch competition participants, as well as a symbolic and commemorative story to tell in giving this small present to my fellow colleagues, who I imagine playing with the spinning top later on and being reminded of the firm. I want us to be remembered as a family business, an aspect that I see as 'reassuring' – the firm isn't a corporation that only exists to make money, it has real people in charge who can be reached if they need to be told off – and 'reinsuring' – as the marketing lingo goes when buying a product or a service – which anchors the firm as a family enterprise, straight down five generations from my great-grandfather to my nephew" [Lead author].

Moreover, the competition was an opportunity to celebrate the act of creating and to invite the "ghosts" to this celebration to show how the past mixes with the present and how they may come together in the act of creating. "I tell start-ups two things that I didn't learn in business school, but here at the firm. The first is that the opposite of death isn't life; it's creation. To enjoy life, you have to create. And in the tradition of Greek heroes, acting and creating is the path to immortality. So you see, Andy Warhol, the inventor of the 15 minutes of fame, is cracking open a bottle of champagne with my father tonight. The second thing I say is that entrepreneurs are like artists in that they are overcome with emotion when the force of life wins out over the inertia of matter. Life gives off a very strong signal when it wins. This signal is a gift only known by people who have already created – this gift, it's this wonderful momentum, this movement which pushes you to dance and which applauds your success after long, intense efforts. This simple gift life gives is called joy. The joy of creating is a dopamine rush" [Lead author, address given at the gala night].

Lastly, the competition sent an implicit yet clear message to the public that the firm was not for sale and that, while its new leader may have arrived at its helm without wanting it, he had no intention of dismantling the firm. "You don't sell the dead, especially after making them an offering" [Lead author].

Lastly, this ritual led people to talk about their memories of the late founder and revealed the existence of another, hidden family "ghost", whose presence brought about the firm's existence

During the planning of the competition, and to an even greater extent after the gala night, people began to open up about the imprint Jean-Claude had left on them. We collected a number of accounts from partners, employees and clients who recounted how certain memorable experiences they had had with Jean-Claude continued to inspire them. They also recounted how they spontaneously did an artificial and personal maieutic exercise involving the late leader. When faced with an issue, be it complex or even trivial, to better work out how they might address it, these individuals asked themselves what Jean-Claude would have done

in their situation. And in the heat of this theoretical exercise, some admitted that they even initiated an artificial artefact of dialogue with Jean-Claude's "ghost".

One such example of this involved Jean-Claude's views on taking on new clients and employees. A partner told us: "I remember my job interview with Jean-Claude. He asked me how I'd react to an openly racist client [the partner interviewed is non-white]. My reply was that I'd take a step back, remain professional and act as if nothing was amiss. Jean-Claude paused for a second while looking me in the eyes and further pressed: 'No, honestly, just between the two of us, what would you do? Really?' I maintained that I would remain professional. Then Jean-Claude said to me: 'I don't believe you. If you really mean that, it'd be a serious mistake. You have to choose your clients. Never forget that. Choose them for their human qualities above all else. We're a family firm. We're concerned with the long term. Our clients have to be like us. So, if you realise that a prospect or a client is racist, you show them the door, physically and immediately. Don't compromise when it comes to human values'" [A partner]. The same partner went on to say that whenever he had a meeting with a prospect or a job candidate, he felt like Jean-Claude was still in the office with him and telling him: 'Consider the human side, not just the business or technical angle. Is this someone you want to choose? What's your intuition? Do you want them as a client, as an employee?" [A partner].

Another partner shared with us that he still feels haunted by Jean-Claude, especially when he listens to jazz: "I've been in contact with Jean-Claude virtually every day from 1984 through to today. Yes, I said today. I know he's dead, but he lives on inside of us. He was, he is, a captain of industry, warm, awe-inspiring, a real gentleman. Beneath his gruff exterior, he was sentimental, interested in people, in children. He was a fan of jazz. We had that in common. Ragtime, stride. When I listen to it, he's there with me" [A partner].

One of the firm's collaborators also recounted how Jean-Claude's "ghost" remains present to him during the social events the firm hosts: "I've never been in a meeting with Jean-Claude where there wasn't champagne. Everything revolved around champagne. He believed that people are more productive when they share a good time together. Whenever I'm having a glass of champagne with people from the firm, I feel that he's still around and toasting with us" [A client].

When a secretary from the firm began to worry about the disappearance of a box of photos of Jean-Claude and recalled the yearly meetings of a secretarial club which he helped create, she referred to him in the present tense: "He must be upset that this box of photos and archives is missing. I have to ask Jacky if he took the box and, if he did, tell him to give it back to us" [A secretary].

Lastly, this ritual of opening up about Jean-Claude led to the revelation of the presence of a secret third family ghost. After the pitch competition, the surviving leader revealed that Jean-Claude had founded the firm around the time of the death of his daughter, who died within a

few days of being born. "My father has influenced me to see the firm like my young sister who was born and who died before me. When I'm looking after the firm, I'm looking after a person who doesn't have a body, I'm looking after a ghost who mustn't be mistreated" [Hervé Colas].

The opening up ritual thus brought to light the existence of artefacts of dialogue with the late founder, ones that were more intimate and personal within the firm and its collaborators. Furthermore, the ritual led to the revelation that a "hidden ghost" had been present since the firm's founding and to which it was intimately connected. The late founder had himself been haunted and saw the creation of the family firm as a way to keep alive his own private memories of his daughter, who died when she was just a few days old. He passed this secret ghost on to his son, now the firm's leader, who then revealed the existence of his sister so as to complete the business's handover. "My father passed down to me this intimate way of viewing the firm, as if it's a sibling of mine. I was and continue to be the conduit for the socio-emotional burden associated with this metaphor. Once the veil had been lifted, this family secret undeniably brought the members of the firm closer together and built trust" [Hervé Colas].

The pitch competition was a one-off event, which only increased its specialness and its legendary mark on the firm. Those who took part in the planning of the competition and who attended it are now able to pass on the firm's story and secrets to its new members. The latter group experience the event through the various remarkable stories told by living participants, and which implicitly communicate the values held by the firm and its founder.

Discussion

This section touches on our paper's theoretical contributions and contributions to the field of management, as well as its limitations and the opportunities it opens up for future research.

Theoretical contributions

From a theoretical standpoint, this paper confirms the typology put forward by Bazin and Leclair (2019) on the many, complex and ambiguous "organisational ghosts" that can be approached by way of the "epistemic ghost conveying an untold secret" and the "ethical spectre embodying an otherness to be embraced". Indeed, the notion of an untold secret is present here, particularly through the spinning top game which historically symbolises an activity that serves as a ruse to communicate secrets or emotions. The notion of a secret is also obvious in the revelation of a hidden ghost whose presence brought about the firm's existence. Additionally, our case study confirms the notion of a spectral ethics and otherness that we internalise and have contact with through this artificial and personal maieutic exercise described by several of our interviewees.

This paper goes beyond a mere confirmation of Bazin and Leclair's typology given that it describes strategic practices integrating "organisational ghosts". To the best of our knowledge, this has never been studied as in depth through a real-world case study and a first-hand account. Our paper is unusual in that it covers a case study involving the lead author who also runs his family's firm, allowing him to discuss and analyse strategic management practices – whether conscious or unconscious, but acknowledged after the fact – that draw on "organisational ghosts".

This paper demonstrates that the firm in question has a commemorative aspect which is both voluntary (the late leader envisioned his firm as an organisational entity that preserved the memory of his deceased daughter) and unconscious (the new leader was not initially aware of the burden of memory within the firm), and which sometimes is used consciously (the new leader worked remembrance into the firm's strategic management practices).

Regarding the literature on the phenomena of the lingering "presence" of founding leaders after their death and the literature on the concept of commemorative rituals and other specific forms of organisational remembrance, this paper provides a space for these works to dialogue with one another, show their complementary nature and, above all, how they can be put into practice. This paper shows that, if we recognise the importance of the traces left behind by late leaders, then we should also seriously consider the ability possessed by certain of their survivors to evoke and make use of these traces to their advantage in their business. This ability can be exercised in a strictly private context, but it may also be expressed publicly through full-fledged organisational rituals. Our paper thus brings together and demonstrates the practical applications of three theoretical fields, the cross-cutting impacts and complementary aspects of which deserve to be further examined by organisational researchers.

Contributions to the field of management

From a managerial perspective, this paper serves as a useful reference point for all leaders, especially those of family businesses, who have to coexist with the traces and "ghosts" of their deceased predecessors. Our paper provides a real-world example of this phenomenon at work in a family business. Given how difficult it is to obtain accounts from people on this topic, this paper is already a valuable contribution to the field. People are hesitant to discuss the deceased with honesty and transparency, particularly when the dead remain present as "organisational ghosts". Additionally, this paper recounts how a leader attempted to understand and make use of the traces of one such ghost to ensure the success of the handover of his family's business.

The pitch competition was devised as an offering made to honour the memory of the late leader – a symbolic sacrifice for the "organisational ghost". This offering amounted to money, a trophy, a competition and even an award named after the late leader. This event served

to secure the firm's identity, long-term future and sound footing, and communicate the fact that it was not for sale. Far from posing a threat to the firm's existence, the founder's death strengthened the business in that it created a new intangible asset for it to make full use of: the "organisational ghost" of its late leader.

Other business leaders experiencing similar circumstances to those outlined in our case study could use it to guide their own response to such lingering "presences". This paper helps to show that this phenomenon is real and useful in the field of management, as it has practical applications.

This paper highlights in particular the way a "ghost" can be publicly and collectively evoked, embraced and promoted. Our case study calls on leaders to go public about their connection to the deceased and to regard it as an intangible asset that the organisation can treasure and nurture.

Limitations and opportunities for future research

One of our paper's limitations is that it is based on a single case study. Future research should integrate comparative analyses of several case studies involving the examination of the traces and the commemorative rituals of late leaders. However, although the particular situation studied in this paper may seem frequent, its analysis by organisational researchers is a rarity. This is likely due to how difficult it is to obtain first-hand accounts from people on such a private, and to a certain extent, sacred matter. It is no easy task to discuss the deceased with organisational researchers, and even less so when the dead are still present, in some shape or form, in the organisation.

Moreover, our case study is focused on a positive "organisational ghost" who had a beneficial impact on his organisation. Future research could try to analyse other types of "organisational ghosts", particularly those having left behind a more controversial imprint and legacy, or those whose evocation could potentially serve as a model to avoid in their organisation.

Lastly, as is the case of any autoethnographic approach, this paper poses the risk of a lack of neutrality in the field. This risk has, however, been mitigated by thorough efforts to triangulate sources, as well as by the involvement of an outside co-author with objectivity vis-à-vis the field and who did not know the deceased individuals before they died.

Conclusion

In this paper, we describe and analyse how a leader of a family business secured its independence and future by tapping into the literature on (i) the lingering "presence" of founding leaders after their death, (ii) the concept of commemorative rituals and (iii) other specific forms of organisational remembrance.

From a theoretical standpoint, this paper confirms the typology put forward by Bazin and Leclair (2019) on "organisational ghosts", and goes further by examining strategic practices integrating this concept and the literature that inspired it.

From a managerial perspective, this paper serves as a useful reference point for all leaders, especially those of family businesses, who coexist with the traces and "ghosts" of their deceased predecessors. This paper shows that the latter can represent an intangible asset that the organisation can integrate concretely into its strategic practices.

This paper is a starting point for other work in this exciting field and can be of use to the organisational research community and to practitioners.

Bibliography

ATRAN, S. (2002), *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

BAZIN Y. & LECLAIR M. (2019), « "I see dead people…" À la rencontre des fantômes organisationnels qui hantent les entreprises », *Revue Française de Gestion*, n° 283, pp.11-29.

BELL E., TIENARI J. & HANSSON M. (2014), "Organizational death", *Culture and Organization*, 20, pp. 1-6.

BOURDIEU P. (2014), *Langage et pouvoir symbolique*, Points Essais.

BOYER P. (1994), *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press.

CLASTRES P. (1974), *La société contre l'Etat*, Collection critique, Les Éditions de Minuit.

CUTCHER L., DALE K. & TYLER M. (2019), "'Remembering as Forgetting': Organizational commemoration as a politics of recognition", *Organization Studies*, 40(2), pp. 267-290.

DE BRITO M. J., DA SILVA S. S. & DE JESUS MUNIZ M. M. (2010), "The meanings of the death of the founder: The constructionist approach", *Brazilian Administration Review*, Curitiba, 7(3), July/September, pp. 227-241.

DERRIDA J. (1993), *Spectres de Marx*, Paris, Galilée.

DUMEZ H. (2013), *Méthodologie de la recherche qualitative*, Paris, Vuibert.

HERRMANN, A. F., BARNHILL J. A. & POOLE M. C. (2013), "Ragged edges in the fractured future: A co-authored organizational autoethnography", *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, 2(1), pp. 57-75.

KEMPSTER, S., STEWART J. & PARRY, K. W. (2008), "Exploring co-produced autoethnography", working paper, Bond University, Gold Coast.

LARDELLIER P. (2019), *Sur les traces du rite: l'institution rituelle de la société*, ISTE Group.

MARTIN R. (1984), *Patron de droit divin…*, Gallimard.

ORR K. (2014), "Local government chief executives' everyday hauntings: Towards a theory of organizational ghosts", *Organization Studies*, 35(7), pp. 1041-1061.

SEJOURNET J. (1987), « La gestion héroïque, souvenirs du temps du père Renault », *Gérer et Comprendre*, n°7, juin, pp. 78-87.

SEJOURNET J. (1988), *Une Aventure industrielle*, Éditions Eyrolles.

SMITH A. & STEWART B. (2010), "Organizational rituals: Features, functions and mechanisms", *International Journal of Management Reviews*, Volume 13, pp. 113-133.

SPERBER D. (1997), "Intuitive and reflective beliefs", *Mind and Language*, 12, pp. 67-83.