

## THE DEAD, THE LIVING AND DEVELOPMENT: A PERSPECTIVE OF AKAN FUNERALS

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### ABSTRACT

*Funerals are held to commemorate the death of a family member. Death, among the Akans, is considered a moment when the human soul departs this world of pain and suffering to the spirit world for a transitional rest. Celebration of funerals in many Akan communities have some inherent factors which suggest a strong communal will to meet together to support people in any form of difficulty, contribute towards the expenses of those in distress, and also as effective points for announcing community programmes. Funerals these days are losing the element of sadness and emotional devastation to positive exploitation for social and physical development.*

**Keywords:** Death, Burial, Funeral, Social infrastructure, Paraphernalia, Refurbishment

### Introduction

Among the Akans, there are many social functions such as puberty initiation, marriage, funerals, sporting events and durbars. Some of these, especially funerals, sporting events and durbars have both commercial and development contents. In this study a particular focus is put on funerals for the way they have been developed and exploited for physical and social development in the communities. Discussions will focus on the Akan concept of death, organisation of funerals and their implications for such social infrastructure as housing and road improvement and construction, provision of amenities like water and sanitation, and religious premises improvement. Conclusions will be drawn on the necessity for funerals to be properly organised to benefit community development.

### METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

Ordinarily, an adult Akan is expected to participate in the celebration of funerals in one's community and also attend funerals of deceased friends, and those of relations of one's friends and associates. Observations made during such funerals, and investigations into some aspects made at Apam and Diaso in the Central Region, Donyina, and Kotei-Deduako near Kumasi in the Ashanti Region, and Nkoranza in the Brong Ahafo Region, constitute the basis of this paper. Previous academic works on funerals were also consulted.

### AKAN CONCEPT OF DEATH

Funerals are held to commemorate the death of a family member. Death, among the Akans, is considered a moment when the human soul departs this world of pain and suffering to the spirit world for a transitional rest [1]. After

careful examination of dirges and activities at Akan funerals, Sarpong [2] concluded that the Akan perceives death as the outward journey by a deceased person to the underworld, or spirit world to which his ancestors have already gone, a place where he must settle any account with those who have gone before him. It can be seen from this perspective that the Akan perceives death as a transitional process in which a person's life in the physical world is transformed into the spiritual realm. At this point he is called a 'ghost' (saman) or an ancestor.

### FUNERALS

In many countries, funeral days are the days of burial. In Ghana, until recently, some days were set apart by the Akans as funeral days to remember the deceased. Usually, Mondays and Thursdays were considered propitious days for funerals. It could however be said that in communities where those days were not traditional holy days, economic activities could be disrupted by the funerals. Nowadays the tendency has been to combine burial and funeral on the same day, usually on Saturdays when many workers will be free to attend the funeral. For religious reasons those who worship on Saturdays prefer having their funerals during the weekdays, preferably on Thursdays.

Not too long ago, the death of a particular person could spell disaster, despair and doom for a family. There were instances where people had to sell or mortgage their cocoa farms or some valuable family property to be able to celebrate the funeral of a deceased relative.

Even though funerals are basically family functions, they normally attract large gatherings for people to socialise. Nowadays in almost all communities, but especially in large towns, funerals are almost becoming community gatherings for fashion displays of latest mourning clothes and styles. Sometimes, people go just hoping to meet someone they could marry. It is not uncommon these days to find a man and a woman meeting for the first time at a funeral and living together the following week like husband and wife. For many sympathisers therefore, funerals are gradually losing the solemn and mourning atmosphere for more joyous and jubilant ones.

### A SOCIAL OBLIGATION

It is customary for people from a particular community who are not ordinarily resident there to travel from wherever they live to attend funerals in their communities. For members of the bereaved family, it is obligatory to come home for the funeral of deceased relations, unless there are reasons beyond their control. It is held among the Akans that the way a funeral

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is organised signifies the success or otherwise of the life of the deceased. It is therefore commonly believed that ancestors may deal severely with those who neglect their duty of organising a fitting burial and funeral for the deceased [2]. Bereaved family members therefore consider the funeral for the deceased as a duty, and no pains may be spared to make them memorable.

In many Akan communities funerals come next only to a festive durbar, and political party rally in terms of number of people gathered to participate. There is a commercial aspect of funerals, which may have to be mentioned briefly even though it does not fall within the focus of discussion. The extent of commercialisation differs in different Akan groups, and among different social and economic groups even within same communities. For instance the commercial aspect of funerals is less pronounced among the Fanti and the other Akan tribes in the Central Region than among the Asante, the Kwahu, and the Akim. Among the Asante, the extent of commercialisation and extravagance depends on many factors including religious belief of both the deceased and their next of kin, and also the social and economic status of the deceased but more importantly of the closest next of kin. Whereas committed Christian families and Muslim groups insist on simple funerals devoid of serving alcoholic beverages and traditional drumming and dancing, non Christians, especially the economically well off families, and traditional leaders organise funerals with all the traditional paraphernalia like 'awisiaa do' and 'adasoa' which are rented from professional undertakers at considerable cost. These are normally accompanied with traditional drumming and dancing. Irrespective of the social, religious, or economic status of the deceased, some form of music is provided at the funeral grounds. Whether it is the traditional 'nwomkoro' group or dance band, or gospel music group, loud public address systems are usually used to play music, announce the arrival of important personalities and groups, and to publicise donations made by individuals and groups to the bereaved family. In small communities, they are also used to announce impending community activities, such as a community meeting at which important decisions concerning the particular community will be made. Such discussions are not, and cannot be held during the funeral celebration because in the first place, they could disrupt the sympathy and donations being given to the bereaved family, and secondly, not all people at the funeral come from the community itself and thus may not be interested in the discussions.

#### FUNERALS AND PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

Improvement in roads and general transportation has made it possible for more people to travel to mourn with bereaved families and also to contribute towards funeral expenses. People who want others to know they are financially successful pay large amounts of money as donations to the bereaved family and have them announced on the huge loudspeakers. Bye-laws have been made in some communities, especially in the Kwahu area, to oblige every citizen to pay a fixed sum of money towards development activities at the same time as one is paying one's contribution towards the funeral expenses to the bereaved family. This practice is not prevalent in large towns and cities in Ashanti and in the Central Region.

Bereavement and funeral celebration have thus become a source of socio-economic infrastructure development in Akan communities in Ghana. The Akans have a saying: 'owuo sei fie' which literally translates as "death destroys the home" (due to debts and stresses and the like that bereavement leaves in its trail). Now the saying is fast changing to 'owuo siesie fie' (death decorates the home). In anticipation of friends and colleagues at work places following bereaved relations to mourn with the entire family, and in order to make such colleagues feel comfortable during their stay for the funeral, and again for personal and family prestige, repairs are made to old and dilapidated family houses to the extent of the economic ability of the bereaved family. Parts of old buildings, usually where the deceased will be laid in state, are refurbished, or redecorated but this very much depends on the social and economic status of either the deceased or one of their close relations. A number of houses were observed at Diaso, Donyina, Ayeduasi, and in many Akan towns and villages which had either been freshly repainted or completely refurbished as a result of recent deaths in those houses. At Donyina, work on a house under construction had been suspended for sometime. Work resumed and progressed with amazing speed when the father of the owner of the house died. The house was made ready and the necessary facilities provided in time for the funeral of the deceased. At Busunya, near Nkoranza, two houses had just been completed by people working in the cities in anticipation of the death of their aged parents.

Often the relations working in large towns and cities provide the money for such refurbishment. In other cases, the head of the family takes a soft loan for such activities, expecting to repay it from donations people make during the actual funeral celebration. In the event of donations made not adequate enough to pay all the loans taken for the refurbishment and other activities relating to the celebration of the funeral, all the family members consider it an obligation to contribute to defray all outstanding debts. This could be the reasoning behind the traditional saying "owuo de mmomu ba" to wit, death unifies.

In some cases when a very well to do person dies in a family their next of kin, anticipating a large turnout of people from cities and other far away places, have undertaken to repair roads leading to their village, or to their block in the cities, at the expense of the family. In the latter part of 1994, an individual from Donyina resurfaced the road from Apeadu to the town, a distance of about 6km. to make it more comfortable for people who were coming from Accra and Kumasi to attend the funeral of his father. Early that same year, a prominent man from Deduako resurfaced the road from Kotei to Deduako a few weeks before the funeral of his deceased relative. It may be added that the District Assembly or even the national government can get involved in the repair of roads leading to villages of dead people who played an important role in the Assemblies or in the national government. In October 1996, the road from Ayanfuri to Diaso in the Upper Denkyira District was resurfaced just before the funeral of the mother of a former Chief Executive of the District Assembly and a prominent member of the ruling government. In fairness the road which was in very deplorable state had been given on contract even

before the woman died but the contractor had not mobilised his equipment to start work. About two weeks to the funeral, the contractor hurriedly scrapped and filled very bad sections of the road to make it more motorable. All equipment on the road were moved away from site soon after the funeral. Work had not resumed on the road a couple of months after the funeral.

Churches have not missed out on the development trend in funerals. The Orthodox Churches conduct burial service for deceased members in the church premises. Almost all sympathisers who go to the funeral attend this service irrespective of whether they are Christians or not, or whether they belong to that denomination or another. It is not uncommon for an appeal for funds to be made during the burial service of a Christian. Mourners at the service are expected to make voluntary contributions towards a particular project to be undertaken in memory of the deceased. The pulpit, the marble on two columns, and some pews in the Apam Methodist Church were procured from such appeals. At Buabin near Dunkwa on Offin, the relatives of a woman whose burial service was to be conducted in the local Catholic Church offered to paint and decorate the Church premises. In the local Methodist Church relatives of a deceased member provided a few pews in memory of their deceased relative. At Ayeduasi near Kumasi, the relatives of a deceased member of a Pentecostal Church offered to pay for the erection of a column in their new church building in memory of the deceased relative. In all the instances, the names of the deceased in whose memory the items were procured are written on the particular items. It could be inferred that all these development trends may be the result of the traditional perception of death being a transitional process in a person's being, and the willingness of the living associates to discharge their duties to satisfy the departed souls. Sarpong sums it all in saying:

Death is a fundamental modality of living, concrete existence... The presence of death is so fundamental to existence that not one of its stirrings can be understood otherwise than in the light of a constitutive and systematic ordering towards death. [2]

#### SUPPORT FOR FUNERAL AND DEVELOPMENT

The knowledge that friends and colleagues at work places, would accompany bereaved colleagues to mourn with them and their entire family has triggered the formation of a number of citizens associations by citizens of particular towns and traditional areas working in urban areas. For instance whereas there are associations like Apam citizens, Buabin citizens, Kokofu citizens, etc. associations, which mainly address issues concerning particular towns, there are also Denkyira-Twifo-Heman citizens, Nkoranza citizens, Kwahu citizens, etc. associations which address issues concerning the respective traditional areas or even the district. The Accra Arts Centre, the Centre for National Culture, Kumasi, and other places such as the Prisons' canteens in the regions are constant meeting places for such associations. One of the objectives of the associations is to offer financial and other needed support to enable a bereaved member to discharge his or her obligations for the funeral of a deceased relation.

Generally the increase in exploitation of funerals, especially in the Akan areas, for improvements in social facilities in the communities has been phenomenal. On another level, the citizens' associations meet to plan activities to raise funds for development projects in their hometowns or even in the district capital. Citizens who migrate to other rural areas for activities such as farming have a pre-determined annual contribution paid into community coffers. This contribution is in addition to the token levy paid during funeral celebrations, and occasional community levy collected in which women normally pay half the amount paid by men. The funds raised normally go to support community activities such as the provision of school buildings, school furniture and community clinics.

#### CONCLUSION

Death is a painful departure of loved relations into eternity and may create a vacuum, in terms of provision for daily bread and other support in the family. In times past this could lead to many days of mourning and fasting and devastation in the family. There is however a consolation in the Akan, and indeed, in many Ghanaian families that part of a man's personality survives after death. This may be influencing the current trend for funerals emerging into social functions which could bring about physical and social development. This emerging trend appears to be sustained by the development of especially transportation infrastructure, which has made it possible for people to travel far, and with relative comfort, to attend funerals. This may strengthen the view that development attracts further development. The opportunity offered to mourners from other areas to see development projects in other communities where they attend funerals may provide community, and family property, project development ideas, which may be tried in other communities. This could underlie the development support ideas of citizens associations. Death therefore has a positive side to the living despite the feeling of irrecoverable loss and despair that accompanies it.

#### RECOMMENDATION

A committee constituted by representatives of the bereaved family, Unit Committee and the traditional authority to plan and execute the funeral of deceased citizens could cut down on unnecessary costs that accompany funerals. The committee could channel the inherent tendency of all citizens to assist the bereaved in mourning the deceased, and the willingness of mourners to contribute towards expenses, into undertaking activities that could help uplift the image of both the bereaved family and the community. The Akan saying that '*owuo aye kontonkrowi, eda amansan nyinaa kon mu*', to wit, death is (a rainbow) universal chain that bedecks the neck of all humanity, will be the basis upon which all citizens, both resident and absent, will be prepared to contribute labour and cash for communal provision of such facilities as public places of convenience and communal meeting place for organising funerals.

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