WOMEN’S ROLES IN THE MOURNING RITUALS OF THE AKAN OF GHANA

Osei-Mensah Aborampah
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Akan women play central roles in the care and disposal of the dead and the management of bereavement. Mortuary rituals provide members of the society with adaptive means of mourning the dead, and the expressions of grief ensure a systematic adjustment to human loss. Funerals and mourning rites include music and dance, which capture so many aspects of Akan transitional rituals. The funeral celebration has become a perfect medium for not only understanding Akan traditional and popular culture, but also for appreciating the impact of social changes on Akan society. (Akan, women, funerals, culture, change)

From birth through puberty, marriage, maturity, and old age, Akan lineage members pass through various rites and rituals binding them spiritually and culturally to others in their communities. Because of the inevitability of death and belief in an active life after death, the Akan of Ghana have developed elaborate rituals to ease the pain of physical separation and to guide the dead into the spiritual world of the ancestors. The patterns and processes of grieving among the Akan appear to be similar to those reported elsewhere. According to Platt and Persico (1992:xi-xii), four significant variables tend to influence the human response to grief. These are the social meaning of death, the relationship between the deceased and the survivors, the significance of the mode of death, and the nature of the support network available to the bereaved. The notion of the social meaning of death relates to various definitions that members of a society attach to the nature of death, the origin of death as a cultural concept, and the survivors’ prior experiences. Relevant issues addressed in this area include a group’s conception of the universe and humankind’s place in it, as well as its relationship with nature and its religious beliefs.

Questions about the relationship between the deceased and survivors seek an understanding of the positions occupied by the deceased and the bereaved family in their community. Types and extent of social, economic, political, and religious relationships that prevailed between the deceased and survivors also are relevant. The third factor (the significance of the mode of death) entails comprehension of the manner of death experienced by the deceased and the social meaning that a group attaches to that form of death. For example, a group’s response to suicide or death from retaliatory sorcery may be different from how the group responds to death from an illness or from old age or to death attributed to the work of witchcraft. Finally, according to Platt and Persico (1992:xii), the nature of the social support network available to survivors includes the social definitions associated with the role of the bereaved and the expectations for family and community members to share in supportive behavior to aid the grieving individuals. The relative importance of each of the variables is difficult, if not impossible to ascertain, but collectively they appear
to account for most of the cross-cultural variations in human response to and management of death.

However, Platt and Persico (1992:xiii) deplore the fact that anthropological inquiry on death and grief responses has been conducted largely in Western societies and that “very little comparative examination of the determinants of grief responses in non-Western societies has been undertaken to date.” Their edited volume attempts to fill this gap by presenting case studies from non-Western societies. This essay seeks to contribute to the attempts to broaden the knowledge base for cross-cultural understanding of death and responses to grief. More specifically, this essay is concerned with the general meanings of death and the roles of women in funeral celebrations of the Akan of Ghana. While much of the presentation is focused on Platt and Persico’s concern with the social meanings of death that influence grief responses, their other three factors will be examined as well. To do so, the first section presents an interpretive understanding of the social meaning of death to the Akan through a review of the socioanthropological approaches to issues of death and mortuary rituals, highlighting only the aspects germane to the present project. The second section provides a description of women’s roles in Akan funeral celebrations. In effect, this section addresses an aspect of the nature of the social support network available to survivors. Here, emphasis is placed on the different kinds of work performed by women for the management of death and the successful resolution of grief, including the poetic speeches and literary qualities contained in mourning and funeral dirges performed by women. These funeral dirges, along with the mortuary rituals, beliefs about life after death, the culturally determined ways of disposing the mortal remains, and the ritual and popular responses of survivors, constitute what I call Akan death culture. The third and concluding section examines the impact of the industrializing process on the Akan conception of death and its accompanying mortuary rituals and grief responses. The main argument of this essay, then, is that Akan culture provides members of the society with a highly adaptive means of mourning the dead and that various mechanisms and emerging opportunities for the expression of grief ensure a systematic and positive adjustment to human loss.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO DEATH AND AKAN MORTUARY RITUALS

According to McCaskie (1989:420), social anthropology has provided us with the fullest discussion of the cross-cultural meanings of death and mortuary rituals. In McCaskie’s view, two approaches from the socioanthropological tradition are relevant to the Asante (Akan) death culture. The first approach focuses on the constructions placed on death and mortuary rituals and their link to reproduction and sexuality. This approach has more relevance for an understanding of the social meaning of death pertaining to (Asante) kings. Therefore, its explanation will be rather brief.

In its simplest treatment this approach pertains to the symbolic relationship between the killing of a divine king and the belief that subsequent agricultural
production or hunting would be bountiful. McCaskie (1989:421) finds aspects of this symbolic relationship built into Asante oral history in the sense that the creation of Asante society and culture involved the arduous task of taming a huge and threatening natural forest. Mastery over, and thus the “death” of the forest connoted sustenance of human life. Since the power of the Asantehene (king of Asante) was equated with _odum_ (the largest tree in the forest of Asante), its destruction was taken to mean increase in the fertility of the land and people. McCaskie alludes to Rattray’s (1927:127) characterization of the festival of _Odwira_ as “the feast of the dead” to underscore the link between the commemoration of the deaths and mortuary rituals of all past Asante kings, and the future fertility of crops and people. Here again, the idea is that the two events of the Odwira festival and mortuary rituals (i.e., funeral celebrations) brought people together in cultural performance that assured the future growth of crops and the anticipated prosperity of the Asante nation. In effect, McCaskie employs the metaphor of the coolness provided by large trees in the forest region of Asante and the festival of Odwira to explain the vital role of the Asantehene in the defense and regulation of the social order, the propitiation of the royal ancestors, and the cleansing of society from defilement. The explanation thus far is sufficient for our purposes since this theoretical approach to death and mortuary rituals is not directly relevant to the present analysis. With regard to the drama associated with the disposal of the corpse and the behavior of the bereaved and the community, mortuary rituals are treated as rites of passage in which sociological dramas centered around corpses are enacted. McCaskie (1989:426-27) explains it as follows:

> Typically, this drama had two significant, enabling acts separated by an interval. In the first act, the deceased individual was ritually detached from the social, often by means of “primary” burial or some other alternative form of temporary disposal of the corpse. In the second act, the corpse was given final or “secondary” burial, the social role of the dead individual was reallocated, and society moved on from its temporary dialogue with mortality. The interval between the two acts was liminal period, distinguished by mourning, and characterized by a recognition that the departed, lingering ambiguously somewhere between the end of biological existence and a full incorporation into the afterlife, might intervene in human affairs in malicious and dangerous ways.

This rightly points out that the notions of primary and secondary burial are relevant to understanding Akan mortuary rituals. Implied in the primary and secondary burials are the processes of grieving and mourning. It is these two dramas that are of immediate concern here. Lindemann (1963:703) defines grief as “the state of pain, discomfort, and often physical or natural impairment that in most persons follows from the loss of loved ones.” Lindemann (1963) suggests that grief seems a particularly personal emotion. Nonetheless, its onset and course can only be understood in their social and cultural context. The latter point was emphasized in Hertz’s (1960) treatment of mortuary rituals. He argued that the intensity of grief expended by any individual or group was dependent on a socially constructed formula, rather than an innate or natural feeling. For example, the mourning of an infant or the first-born child to an Akan was always cursory, while the mourning of
an elder was not. The longer a person has lived, the more protracted the period of mourning tends to be. The extended mourning derives from, among other things, the loss of shared experiences, and the loss of the sense of stability and well-being provided by the presence of the deceased.

The implication here is that culture affects grief and therefore Akan culture influences what sort of loss a death will involve. In traditional Akan societies, the belief was that the deceased elder would transit into the afterworld where he or she could transform into a postmortem jural authority over his or her living lineage members. An elder’s death was deemed to pose a crisis in the group’s life, and required an elaborate ritual and funeral to ensure his or her comfort in the afterlife. This type of management provided an avenue for the deceased to reclaim himself or herself after death. In this regard, the deceased gained by death. To the extent that this interpretation is acceptable, it seems to explain the past attitudes of Akan people to death. An old Akan enjoyed the status of an elder and contemplated death with very little or no anxiety. He or she never pretended to be younger and knew that when he or she died, members of his or her lineage in particular, and the community in general, would assemble to sing stirring memorial dirges and odes to his or her character and achievements, and to introduce him or her to the ancestors with a lavish funeral celebration (Antubam 1963). These beliefs and presumed practices linger in Akan communities in Ghana today.

Culture also affects who experiences a loss by death. Every Akan belongs to an abusua (matriclan or matrilineage). The idea of oneness among members of the abusua is expressed in the collective responsibility for organizing the secondary burial of a departed member. The mourning group is organized by matrilineal descent. Also, the death of a member of the minimal lineage (yafunu) has a relatively higher grief potential than a member of the individual’s patrikin group.

Hertz (1960) also suggests that through mortuary rituals grief is controlled and distributed. Among the Akan the control and distribution find expression in public mourning or funeral celebration, which provide institutionalized opportunities to express displaced or delayed grief. The premise here is that grief is an inevitable response to death among those for whom the deceased was a valued or loved person. Visible expressions of grief take conventionalized forms such as the dirges already alluded to and occur in predictable contexts, as will be explained later. Alternatively, funerals provide opportunities for individuals to express grief over their own impending deaths; that is, the felt uncertainty about the nature and types of death that await them. The Akan expression, “mesu me wu da mu” (I am weeping over the day I will die), underscores this point. In relation to the primary burial mentioned earlier, funerals may serve as conduits for the physical removal of the body. In the past, as is often the case at present, elderly members of Akan matrilineages were secretly buried at designated places other than the public cemeteries. In those instances, public mourning by bereaved lineage members provided convenient avenues to distract public attention from the disposal of the corpse.
Perhaps the most important aspect of the public mourning or funeral celebration (i.e., in the context of the secondary burial) is to secure the happiness of the departed on its journey to the spirit world. Relying on insights provided in the work of Rattray (1927:103-04, 182), McCaskie (1989:428) explains this point rather succinctly:

Birth was a suspenseful drama of management into life. Children might elect to run from whence they had come, and accordingly were not named until eight days after birth. Puberty marked their full acceptance of the fact of biological existence. At death, by direct analogy, the indestructible spirit component of the human individual had to be managed back into the continuity from whence it had emanated. Properly transacted mortuary rituals were the indispensable instruments of that process of management. Imperfectly performed or neglected mortuary rituals left the departed in anxious uncertainty of limbo. The dead responded to this offensive status by harassing the living, and by exacting retribution from them.

It follows from McCaskie’s explanation that rites performed during the funeral celebration also served to repair the potential breaches in the fabric of the community that could be caused by a death. The deceased as a corpse and spirit was perceived as a potential source of danger. The perceived threat explains, in part, the elaborate sequence of rituals followed to secure the happiness and safe passage of the deceased into the spirit world.

This interpretive summary has been offered to clarify the social meanings Akan people attached, and in many instances continue to attach, to mortuary rituals. The rituals and grief responses, central to the psychological health of the Akan in light of the social disruption caused by the departing member, are discussed below in relation to women’s roles in Akan funeral ceremonies. The question of gender in the production, circulation, consumption, and reproduction of various cultural dramas is complex. In the next section, it is examined in relation to three key areas: women’s roles in Akan funeral ceremonies and their prominence in accompanying secular and ritual dramas; the operation of the principle of consanguinity during these ceremonies; and presentation of women’s respectability, which stands in sharp contrast to the male-dominated culture of silence during the phase of public mourning and the accompanying rituals.

**WOMEN’S ROLES IN AKAN FUNERALS**

Kinship structure among the Akan is matrilineal. This means that an individual, from birth to death, remains a component of a matrilineage. Upon death, the body remains the property of the matrilineage, whose responsibility it is to provide the deceased member with a decent funeral in relation to the purposes articulated in McCaskie’s (1989) explanation. The roles of female lineage members is critical in several areas of funeral rites. For example, women play a vital role in protecting a widow or widower from the deceased. This is achieved through the observance of the widowhood ritual. In the case of a widow, female affines deal kindly or harshly with her depending on the way and manner she treated her husband while alive. During the first 40 days after the death of her spouse, the widow is considered to be in an
impure state, and until she is purified her actions are to be governed, regulated, and dictated by an attendant. She is not to do anything that is not ritually sanctioned by this attendant. The matrilineage of the deceased usually selects an experienced female member as an attendant to the widow. The widow is supplied with a charm to wear in order to repel evil forces, particularly the spirit of the dead spouse that would otherwise haunt her. The female attendant makes sure the charm is properly secured during the entire 40-day funeral celebration. The attendant also supervises the grieving, eating, drinking, conversation, and public seating of the widow. The widowhood ritual, according to Kyei (1992:82), is performed to meet three basic needs. First, it protects the widow or widower from misfortune, including economic loss. Second, it preserves the mental balance of the widow or widower. Third, the charm is intended to keep all bodily organs, genitals in particular, unimpaired. These ends could be attained only with the crucial role of the female attendant, and by undergoing this ritual both privately and publicly, a widow is given the support needed in the process of adjustment to normal life.\(^2\)

Another area of responsibility is preparation of the body for lying in state. The corpse is washed by the older women of the matrilineage. Since the departed spirit is believed to journey to the spirit world, it is important for the deceased to be provided with the necessities of a traveler, including food. Until the recent past, it was quite common for special dishes to be prepared by female lineage members and set on a table in front of a corpse that lies in state. This responsibility to feed and equip the spirit of the deceased on its long journey to the spirit world falls on female members of the matrilineage. In the past, an elderly woman also prepared handmade beads to be placed in a brass pan before the corpse of a fellow elderly woman and later buried with her to allow free passage into the ancestral realm (Warren 1975:39). This particular ritual is rarely performed these days. According to Warren (1975), a deceased’s son’s daughter would also sit next to the corpse to fan away flies (if necessary).

As Goody (1975:5) points out, funerals have a dramatic quality and incidents in the past life of the deceased are often dramatized in various Akan communities. Women, at special moments of the funeral celebration, could become the channel or medium of communication with the deceased. At high points of the celebration, any female celebrant, usually not of the deceased’s matrilineage, could be possessed by the spirit of the deceased. She then dramatizes the life experiences and desires of the deceased. These could include dress and speech or a dance imitation of the deceased. She also could transmit messages, instructions, advice, etc., to the bereaved family or community, could forecast impending fortunes or disasters, and prescribe possible measures for forestalling them. Misfortune could befall surviving family members or the community as a whole if these messages and instructions were not duly acted upon. As seers, women in trance at funeral celebrations rose to the position accorded the community’s priests and priestesses, and were thus treated not only with respect but with awe as well. More important, through these mediums, an otherwise very difficult family or lineage conflict could be resolved. Akan people trusted such
mediums as oracles to resolve difficult cases for which satisfactory adjudication by the living was deemed impossible. Vestiges of these types of mortuary rituals prevail in the rural areas of Akan communities.

Women also play an indispensable role in the perpetuation of the matrilineage or matriclan within the context of the tripartite role of social construction involving the living, the dead, and those yet to be born. An Akan had, and to a large extent still has, a deep-rooted sense of belonging, loyalty, and emotional attachment to his or her matriclan. This is succinctly articulated by Danquah (1928:194):

If you would know what an Akan regards as most sacred and inviolable, attempt to make distinctions between him and members of his clan, or worse still, his family. The family being more or less the unit personality in society an individual tends to regard himself as out of touch with all existence when divorced from his family. Hence the sacredness of the family tie.

In practical terms, the matriclan serves as what Davidson (1969:113) calls instruments of collective lineage welfare. This partly explains the premium placed on having many children in Akan culture. One of the measures of the strength of an Akan matriclan was, and to a large extent still is, its numbers, and of course it is the female members whose reproduction ensures lineage continuity. Their numbers come alive during funeral celebrations of deceased members. Public mourning sums up the past history of a matrilineage and represents an affirmation of the contributions of female members for the survival of the lineage.

There is yet another important responsibility that female members of a lineage assume during funeral celebrations. Akan funeral celebration is marked by sanctioned displays of behavior that would seem unusual to a stranger. To an Akan, a funeral with large numbers of mourners and wailers is a sign of the worthiness of one’s existence here on earth. So it is important to bewail the dead aloud and openly. However, since men should not shed tears in public, women do most of the crying and weeping.3

As indicated earlier, funerals constitute legitimate occasions not only to express grief, but also to pay tribute to the dead. According to Kamerman (1988:66), the symptoms of normal grief include bodily distress, a preoccupation with the image of the deceased, guilt, hostility, and alteration or loss of normal patterns of conduct. While the symptoms are present among the Akan, especially the women, their expressions are conventionalized and artistic in the sense of the oration and the poetic gestures that accompany them. For example, a woman would mourn by repeatedly saying “Ahia me” (I am impoverished by this death), with both hands clasped on top of her head. Or, she would cry out, “Aka me nko o!” (I have become lonely by this death), with both arms stretched up and forward pointing to the corpse lying in state. Several other grieving gestures are discussed in Antubam (1963:64-65).

The oral literary aspect of Akan mourning finds expression in the libation before the corpse and in singing stirring memorial dirges to the character and achievements of the deceased. Singing funeral dirges is a major function of women, while elderly men usually, but not always, pour the libation. Unfortunately, many of the dirges
cannot be associated with the individual women who created them with much intellectual and aesthetic genius. Nonetheless, it is important to note that for the audience at a funeral ceremony, the performance is much like a poetic recital. Many of the texts have been composed by nameless individuals and handed down from one generation to another by word of mouth. The singing is not an organized performance. Bereaved mourners, friends and sympathizers can join in the wail by singing a dirge of one sort or another. Singers are supposed to sing well and use appropriate gestures and steps where necessary. Regarding performance, Nketia (1969:9) offers the following observation:

A good singer wins in emotional appeal: She moves her audience. Nevertheless, a funeral is not the occasion for mere display, though the temptation is great and many succumb to it. One of the requirements of a performer is that she should really feel the pathos of the occasion and the sentiments embodied in the dirge. Pretense is condemned and mock-sadness is discouraged. A tear should fall, lest you are branded a witch and a callous person. If a tear is physiologically difficult to shed, you must induce it by some means; but if it is physiologically impossible for you, it would be better to have the marks of tears on your face than nothing at all.

The singers of the dirge rarely sit down: they pace up and down the place of the funeral, flanked on all sides by members of the lineage, friends and sympathizers seated on stalls, raised planks, chairs or on the ground. Each circuit brings them in front of the corpse or where the lineage head or the bereaved father, mother, husband or wife sits. Some walk out then come in again.

An effective combination of excellent choice of text, poetic recital, and appropriate gestures is sure to captivate the audience and the bereaved lineage. The dirges themselves cover the whole spectrum of social life, including kinship, marital and familial relations, economics, political activities, and societal values. Below are selected examples of dirges usually sung in praise of the deceased. The selections are taken from Nketia (1969) and McCaskie (1989). While no attempt has been made to adjust the Twi renditions or the English translations, the ordering has been rearranged to facilitate comprehension of their import.

An Expression of the Extent of Loss

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ahunu mu nni me dua bi na maso mu</th>
<th>There is no branch above which I could grasp</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asuo ayiri me oo, na Otwafoo ne hwan?</td>
<td>I am in flooded waters. Who will rescue me?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agya behu me, na onhu me yie bi</td>
<td>When father meets me, he will hardly recognize me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obehu me, na meso ketego ne nwansena</td>
<td>For he will meet me carrying all I have: a lorn sleeping</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>mat and a horde of flies.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

| Mene womma bewe ananse oo, | Your children and I will feed on the spider; |
| Na akura tee, obopou | The mouse is too big a game |
| Praa e, mene wo mma oo | Your children and I (what will become of us!) |
| Ena e, me nko m'anin | I am done for |
| Ayya e, ahia me | I am destitute |
| Praa e, ahia me | Your children are looking for you |
| Wo mma rehwe w'ano | The night is fast approaching, where the orphan is dying |
| Onwumu redwo oo, dee awisiaa afe ne na | to see its mother |

(Nketia 1969:47-48)
An Expression of Desire for Continued Fellowship and Love

Ohi reba a, mane me
Mane me na mene wo di mane
Eye a, mane me denkyemmoo na
manny a gy a, mawe no mono
Wore mane me a mane me
sen kese a egye ahooho

Send me something when someone is coming
Send me something for you and I exchange gifts
Send me parched corn so that I can eat it raw if I am unable to find fire to cook it on
When you are sending me something, I would like a big pot that receives strangers

(Nketia 1969:49)

For a Deceased Mother/Father

Eno, nko nnya me akyire oo
Eno, nko nnya me akyire oo, Osiantan
Ena avu agya me oo:
Na mene hwan na ewo ha yi?

Agya e, aka me nko
Mene wo heko
Agya e, befa me ko
Eye a, ma yenko yen dee mu
Na enye yen tenahere ne ha

O, mother do not leave me behind
O, mother, please do not leave me behind
Mother has died and left me alone:
With whom am I now here?

Father, I am here alone
I shall go with you
Father, come and take me away
Let us go back together to the place where we came from
We do not belong here

(Nketia 1969:45-46)

For a Deceased Priest

Obosomfoo Kosekose oo:
Ohene ni, nkumankuma brebre
Woko a, duom oo, ohene ba
Gye due na duom oo!
Wo duro Kurosia a, bo wodin ma abrane
mma wo so na wodi amantire nu

Farewell, thou priest
Fare thee well, mother of the king
When you start, do not tarry, Prince
Receive condolences and proceed on
When you reach the outskirts of the town, mention your name so that strong men carry you shoulder high for you rule two worlds.

(Nketia 1969:44-45)

For a Deceased Asantehene (Asante King)

Nana atu ne kynie
Awia na ebeku yen.
Womin dee wo gyaa me
Ya ma nsuo nto na ma so hi anom.

Nana (the Asantahene) has removed his umbrella
We shall be scorched to death by the sun.
You know the condition in which you have left me
See to it that there is rain so that I can collect some of it to drink.

Se womane me a, mane me denkyembrebo
Mannya gya a mawe no mono.

If you are sending me parcel
Send me a crocodile’s liver
Singing a dirge in the past usually signaled the commencement of the funeral ceremony and remained its mainstay for a long time, until it was reinforced and eventually overshadowed by music and dance (Nketa 1969:17). The very enactment surrounding singing dirges is a clear testimony to the artistic endowment of Akan women. The themes of the dirge, music and dance, and literary and popular cultural expressions existing today are elaborated in the section that follows.

AKAN FUNERALS AS POPULAR CULTURE

Many elements of contemporary Akan death culture may be viewed as popular culture in the sense that the food, clothing, music, dance, gestures, specialized language, and the commercial advertisements on display during funeral celebrations constitute “distinctive moments in the production, circulation, consumption, and reproduction of cultural forms” (Adjaye 1997:6), which are readily accessible to and affectionately embraced by a wide spectrum of members of various Akan communities. In this regard, the death tradition has become a festival that combines solemn ritual with joyful celebration. Because music and dance capture so many aspects of Akan transitional rituals, including death, funeral celebration has become a perfect medium for not only understanding Akan popular culture, but also for appreciating the centrality of women in the entire drama.

As already indicated, death is framed in religious terms even though secular dimensions are apparent. Given the belief in reincarnation, with biological existence believed to represent a corporeal episode in an unending continuity and the unborn child understood to exist in the spirit world (McCaskie 1989:427), mortuary rituals have been developed accordingly. The patterns and processes of mourning in the past may be summarized here. First, when an Akan lineage member died, the body was prepared and displayed at home. Death customs like washing and dressing the deceased, watching, and waking were observed scrupulously. Neighbors, relatives, and friends were informed of the death and came to provide support. Mourning dresses, usually red and/or black, were worn. Fine gradations of dress marked the different social statuses and categories of those assembled. Finally, the deceased was buried with grave goods such as food, kente or other types of cloth, trinkets, farm implements, and gold dust to ensure an uneventful journey to the spirit world. All these practices constituted cardinal ritual facts of Akan death culture. The festive celebration represented an important occasion for the expression of familial, lineage, and community solidarity, and women played as central a role as in the ritual dimension.

Although many of the traditional ritual practices have been discontinued, much of the popular culture comes alive in the pomp and pageantry of the funeral
celebration. In specific forms, popular culture is reflected not only in the dirges and odes sung to praise the deceased, but more importantly in music and dance. During the public funeral celebrations, traditional singing and drumming groups may provide entertainment for those present. The most popular of these traditional dance ensembles are *adowa, nwonkoro, adenkum, kete, asadua*, and *bosee*, in most of which women are the lead singers. Some of the accompanying musical instruments, such as the *firiкиyiwa* or *nnawuta* (bells) and *donno* (gong), are played by experienced women. Many of the women singers learn the art of singing early in their youth and an accomplished performer is very pleasing to listeners’ ears. A person will be roused to join a singing group or dance if the song reminds him or her of a series of events in his or her life. As in the case of the dirges, the lead singers learn to be adept at manipulating those present by drawing on the direct and indirect experiences of people in the community and by being acutely sensitive to the reactions of the sympathizers and celebrants of the funeral. In this regard, a mutually supportive relationship between the traditional singer and the dancer is established. The singer can work the dancer to high frenzy and the dancer can do the reverse. Both depend on each other for the desired outcome. Until recently, the traditional dance ensembles were rarely paid for their performance at funerals.

An entertaining element of Akan funeral celebration comes alive in the realm of dance movements as well. Men and women frequently dance in separate spaces, moving back and forth toward each other where appropriate. Dance to traditional (or lately highlife) music can be exhausting, involving rapid movements and sometimes leaping to the furious rhythm of the African drum. An exquisite execution draws approval from those present. Nonetheless, the ultimate goal of the performance is always borne in mind: to allow people to pay tribute to the dead. Thus the mortuary ritual and the funeral celebration, in effect, constitute a balancing act. Respect for the deceased is complemented in the display of popular culture with an understanding that the customary care given to the body and the public celebration will somehow safeguard both the dead and the living.

Traditional rituals no longer provide the support they once did. The meaning of a traditional libation today is lost upon a person who holds no beliefs in the traditional religions. The contemporary celebration of death has become largely secularized and/or Christianized, but also a major showcase for conspicuous consumption. A ceremony that invites all to mourn a death has become an avenue for the bereaved to not only express their sentiments for the deceased, but also to openly display the deceased’s and bereaved’s social class standing. Monetary expenditures serve the latter purpose. Funeral professionals and entrepreneurs have become secular substitutes for family and relatives in the handling of the dead. Many elements of funeral services may be purchased nowadays. For example, refrigeration of the corpse allows time for elaborate funeral preparations. Popular orchestras, church choirs, or traditional music and dance troupes may be hired to provide the best entertainment possible. Local announcers equipped with loudspeakers mounted on taxis or private cars may go around to make funeral announcements in poetic
language. These announcements may be aired on the regional or national television and radio stations. In the course of the funeral services, public announcers may be engaged by sympathizers to present their respective donations to the bereaved families. Female representation in Akan death culture, however, remains central even as new features are introduced.

**DISCUSSION**

Profound social changes are taking place in Ghana as in other developing societies of Africa, and mortuary rituals have not been immune to these changes, but have come to reflect a new meaning of death. The dread once held for the spirit of the deceased has waned. Christian interpretations of death have come to supersede traditional ones for Akan Christians. Respect for the dead and the bereaved is now partially conferred by the quantity and quality of material trappings. These changes are themselves a reflection of processes of modernization and Westernization, which purportedly foster the ascendancy of new beliefs and commercialism over tradition.\(^4\)

Much of contemporary Akan popular culture that has crept into funeral ceremonies can be viewed as commercial exploitation. Where palm wine and *Akpeteshi* (local gin) used to be the principal drinks at funerals, imported liquor, various brands of beer, and mineral water have become substitutes. In many instances, fanciful and very expensive caskets placed in hearses have replaced the wooden caskets constructed by local carpenters and carried shoulder high to burial places. Gone are the days when Akosombo red and black prints served as important markers for distinguishing the social hierarchies of those involved in a funeral ceremony. Distinctions are partly made on the basis of who wears the best Dutch wax and other imported prints.

In the past, contributions in kind to funeral ceremonies constituted the norm. Nowadays, cash is collected to spend on a variety of items required to conduct a public funeral ceremony, including remodeling or repairing the lineage base compound, preparation of burial place and food, hiring local or professional musicians and dancers for the entertainment of guests and participants. Cash donations have become a mark of social distinction in many Akan communities. A sympathizer not only has to put on the best funeral clothing, but also has to present a donation of considerable value to the bereaved family. The creeping commercialization is transforming bereavement into a largely monetized venture. Some Akan communities, including many in the Ashanti and Brong Ahafo Regions, have reacted to this process of change by imposing upper limits on the amount of money donated at funeral ceremonies held within their jurisdictions.

Nonetheless, the competition for status in an industrializing society like Ghana has given death much prominence with the accelerated incorporation of business norms into bereavement practices (Pratt 1981). It is now possible to give wide publicity to the deceased’s achievements in terms of culturally accepted criteria of success. This is achieved through the use of media channels available in the country.
WOMEN’S ROLES IN THE MOURNING RITUALS OF THE AKAN

Not only that, wide publicity also enhances the status of the living members of the deceased’s lineage, especially if an elaborate and expensive funeral is provided. By directly or indirectly imposing business norms on bereavement, Akan funeral ceremonies have become social security systems, as well as fashion and entertainment for many participants, especially women. Writing about the ceremonial duties of Kumasi market queens (Ahemma), Clark (1994:269) observes:

The scale of funeral attendance marks structural divisions within the market. When a commodity group member dies, her Ohemma leads all the group members to attend her funeral en masse. The individual ahemma also attend funerals of group members’ close relatives, accompanied by several elders and near neighbors of the bereaved, presenting a group contribution. . . . Many traders also belong to church women’s groups and choirs that attend members’ funerals in uniform, singing. They gain further prestige by fundraising and attending church services together in uniform. Asantes value group membership as such, since for many ceremonial purposes groups are virtually interchangeable. At one funeral I attended, a middle-aged woman remarked appreciatively that the dead woman had belonged to four ekuo, or groups: Two church choirs, a commodity group, and a benevolent society. All four groups attended en masse to make a grand funeral such as anyone might aspire to.

Another social change can be discerned from the passage just cited. Within the context of contemporary ceremonies, nonkin bases of social alignment have emerged to supplement kin relations. Market women’s and church choir groups have become significant celebrants in Akan funerals. As can be inferred from the passage, social realignment provides one more avenue for the infusion of popular culture into Akan mortuary rituals, and the prominence of women in this process is clearly apparent. This process of change underscores Giddens’s (1991:10) observation that “in struggling with problems, individuals help actively to reconstruct the universe of social activity around them.” The point here is that even though death may be viewed as a form of social disruption, it nonetheless offers opportunities for self and group development and future happiness.

In the midst of the rapid social changes, business innovations by women have converged with other social forces to reshape Akan, and for that matter Ghanaian, mortuary rituals and bereavement customs. For example, it is quite common nowadays for the corpse to be elaborately dressed for the wake by professional women. It is also common for women in the clothing business to design and sew special dresses for bereaved families, church choirs, and commodity groups for funeral celebrations. Often these preparations are funded by relatives (both men and women) residing in the cities and abroad.

Those aspects of popular culture infused into the contemporary expression of Akan funerals provide an opportunity for both men and women to make public statements about their own social worth. Given the increasingly hierarchical social order, the competition for status is rendering the need for observing many of the death rituals less significant. Past practices concerning property transfers (i.e., cocoa farm or home ownership) in the course of Akan funeral ceremonies tended to perpetuate gender difference. Since respectability and reputation have come to be associated increasingly with women’s educational status, wealth in terms of landed
property, money, and Christian religious participation, among others, strict observance of widowhood rituals is waning. The acquisition of these status symbols provides women much latitude in the construction of their own life course, and it is likely that a change in the balance of decision-making concerning mortuary rituals will favor the more affluent. Among the largely illiterate masses of women, the traditional mortuary rituals will continue to offer them legitimacy in their management of and responses to death.

Throughout this presentation emphasis has been placed on how Akan culture affected and continues to affect the management and disposal of the dead. Primary and secondary burials are the processes by which these acts are accomplished. Women’s roles in the ritual and popular drama have been assessed. The different kinds of work performed by women make death a reality which demands a community’s reorientation toward life. Affirmation of the social status of the deceased and the bereaved family is achieved through the joyous celebration of the funeral, marked by the display of institutionalized behavior. In general, honor and respect for the dead and the bereaved family come from a large turnout of mourners, music, and dance. The large turnout is achieved not only through the numerous descendants of the deceased’s matrilineage, but also through the social connections accumulated over the deceased’s lifetime.

Akan mortuary rituals are undergoing dramatic changes. The processes of change have resulted in the emergence of an immense and varied amalgam of sentiments, attitudes, and community responses to the funeral celebration which, in its contemporary form, also reflects an expression of popular culture as well as women’s increasing importance. Contemporary expressions of grief help to reinforce Akan communities and, as Giddens (1991:10) points out, while the changes taking place may produce anxieties for many, those changes may also help mobilize more adaptive responses and novel initiatives to death and grief.

NOTES
1. The Akan of Ghana comprise the forebears and succeeding generations who occupied the present Ashanti, Brong Ahafo, Central, Eastern, and Western Regions of the country. Akan cultures include more than a dozen ethnic groups, speaking mutually intelligible dialects. Among these groups are Asante, Fante, Bono, Akyem, Akuapem, Kwahu, Akwamu, Asen, Denkyira, Twifo, and Wass. Another cluster of Akan people occupy southeastern Ivory Coast.
2. This interpretation may be regarded as one of many possible interpretations where there are multiple layers of meaning. If the widowhood ritual should be interpreted as an example of female oppression in Akan societies (Odunoye 1995), then the source of the oppression may also be attributable to the increasingly monetized economy in which the accumulation of material, rather than social, wealth has gained in ascendency and thereby exacerbated marital and other interpersonal tensions.
3. This behavior has been interpreted as an instantiation of the tyranny of the system of patriarchy prevailing in Akan society (see Odunoye 1995 and Dolphyne 1991).
4. For a full treatment of the economic implications of this transformation in Akan culture, see Arhin (1994).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


