

# ‘I want to go!’ How older people in Ghana look forward to death

*In memory of Òpanyin<sup>1</sup> Kwame Frempong*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Older people in a rural Ghanaian community indicated that they look forward to death. Traditional ideas of ancestorhood, reincarnation and modern Christian beliefs about life after death had little influence on their resignation. Images of a possible ‘hereafter’ hardly existed. Agnosticism – in a religious guise – prevailed. They saw death foremost as a welcome rest after a long and strenuous life. Their readiness for death did not, however, include an acceptance of euthanasia. Both the young and the old held the view that life and death are and should remain in God’s hands. This article is based on anthropological fieldwork in the rural town of Kwahu-Tafo in southern Ghana.

**KEY WORDS** – older people, death, ancestors, agnosticism, reincarnation, Christianity, euthanasia, Ghana.

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to explore the views of older people about death. It seeks to describe and understand the explanations and possible anxieties about death felt by those most close to it. The paper draws from a large research project on the social and cultural meaning of growing old, which was carried out between 1994 and 2000 in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town of about 6,000 inhabitants on the Kwahu plateau of the Eastern Province of Ghana. The local population calls itself Kwahu: they are a subgroup of the Akan who constitute almost half of Ghana’s 18 million people. The Akan, who speak Twi, have a matrilineal kinship system which in spite of various inroads survives in both the rural and urban areas.<sup>2</sup>

The research is based mainly on conversations with 35 older people

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and some of their relatives. Snowball sampling was used to find this group (despite the incongruity in the tropics), beginning with my friends' contacts in their neighbourhood. The concept 'old' was not clearly defined before the research began. The group comprises people who were described by others as 'old'. In practice, 'old' proved to be more of a term of respect than of calendar age *per se*. My only concern in selecting respondents was to guarantee some variation of the 'sample' in terms of gender, economic and social status, religious affiliation, and number of children.

Most of the conversations with an older person circled around one topic, for example, his/her life history, the concept of 'old', the power of older people to bless and to curse, the care they received (and gave), their ideas about a successful and unsuccessful life, respect and reciprocity, love, sex in old age, and finally, their views on death, the topic of this paper.<sup>3</sup> These topics were not planned beforehand but grew 'naturally' out of earlier conversations. It often meant that one topic was discussed with one person and another with the next. With some older people I only had one or two conversations, with others many more. The eloquence of some was striking, and has encouraged quotations, for in many cases their way of expressing their views was effective and persuasive.

There were in addition frequent, casual meetings as well as short visits to exchange greetings or to deliver a message. Observations during these visits constituted a crucial element of the research, as they added depth and context to the oral accounts. All the longer conversations were taped, translated and transcribed. During most conversations I was accompanied by a co-researcher who verified my understanding of the Twi language. Towards the end of the field work, the co-researchers sometimes held their own conversations with older members of the community while I was writing my ethnographic notes. They discussed the contents of those conversations with me afterwards, adding their own views.

Doing research among older people has its contingencies: the informants don't last long. Unlike in my own country, The Netherlands, where older people are likely to live for another ten to twenty years, most of the elders I met in Kwahu-Tafo 'disappeared' suddenly. The research began in 1994 with 27 older people (13 women and 14 men), but two years later, ten had died even though most had not given the impression that their lives would soon come to an end. Every time a letter arrived from Ghana, it announced someone's death, usually accompanied by a description of the funeral. It made me realise how fragile life is in a community which lacks good health care (even though

there is a clinic in the town) and, more importantly, does not have the means to pay for the health care which *is* available. When I returned for additional fieldwork, I tried to find ‘substitute’ older people, so 35 older people took part in the research. As I write in December 2001, only six are still alive.

This paper discusses eight related themes on the perception and experience of death among older people in Kwahu-Tafo. They emphasised that death is not something to be afraid of, but rather a welcome visitor that will bring the peace and rest for which they have longed. The concept of a ‘good death’ is closely linked with this positive appreciation, but ‘bad deaths’ also exist. Good and bad deaths constitute the second theme of this article. The discussion also reveals a somewhat agnostic attitude about what happens to a person during and after death, the third theme, and the agnostic stand leads to the fourth theme: people’s views about reward or punishment after death. That discussion in its turn produces the fifth: the concept of ancestorhood. Other themes discussed in this paper are reincarnation and the phenomenon of *òkòba*, the child which ‘returns’; and the influence of the Christian faith on people’s views of death. The last theme is the existence and acceptability of euthanasia. First, however, the social and cultural setting of death in Kwahu society is sketched.

### **Death in Kwahu society**

Contrary to what one might expect, death in Kwahu society is a private affair. Funerals are public events but both the sickbed and death are confined to the seclusion of the house. Death remains strictly private until it is – literally – announced and preparations can start for the funeral. Death, indeed, is in many ways eclipsed by the funeral. People may not know about someone’s poor physical condition and sickness until it is all over. Even relatives may take relatively little interest in the sickness of a person. Medical care is expensive and the outcome is uncertain, so the willingness to spend money on a sick person who is going to die is limited (see Van der Geest 1995; Arhinful 2000). Money spent on a funeral, however, is much more certain to be effective and to bear fruit. That difference in preparedness to pay is further promoted by the private/public distinction. Social criticism is more likely to be raised about a badly organised funeral which everybody observes, than about a poorly cared-for patient hidden in the house. It is this contrast between pre- and post-mortem care which played a significant role in our conversations with older people about their

approaching death and funeral. Popular Highlife songs which are played at funerals in Ghana express laments and despair about death.<sup>4</sup> They typically represent the view of others, the young and the bereaved. They show us the behaviour which others are supposed to display when confronted by death and reveal the norms set by society: the more tears, the better. Those dying themselves, as we will see shortly, are less emotional about death.

### **Welcome death**

Without exception, each older person who discussed the topic of death indicated that he or she was not worried by it. Most of them emphasised that they were rather looking forward to it, as they were tired of living. One of them said, 'let it happen in a flash', and added, 'an old person is never afraid of death'. An older woman expressed that idea very briefly, 'I want to go, I want to join my brothers'. Another woman said, 'whether I am afraid or not, it will come when it is time for me'. One of my (S) conversations (in English) with an elder (M) ended thus:

- M: I am prepared.  
 S: You would like it?  
 M: Yes.  
 S: Are you praying for it to come?  
 M: I am not praying, but if it comes, I will move along. I told you the other day: 'Life is war. It is like the soldier in Vietnam who said: "If the bullet has your number on it, there is nothing you can do about it"'.  
 S: What do you think about death?  
 M: I don't think much. When the time comes, it will come. I don't add it to my mathematics [It's not part of my calculations].

Several have a good reason to long for death. One blind old man said, 'Because of what happened to my eyes, I would like to go'. A woman who was both blind and had one leg amputated was also waiting for death to relieve her. After she had praised her son for his good care ('He does everything for me'), I asked her if she was happy about her present life. She reacted with indignation: 'How can I be happy with this sickness? I would have liked it if I had gone (died) when I lost my leg'. Another older woman (D) who also had become blind explained why she wanted to die in the following words:

- D: I don't think of death anymore. Because whether I think of it or not, it won't come for me. I think that it will come but it does not come.  
 S: Is it your wish?

- D: Yes, but it won't come.  
 S: Do you want to die?  
 D: Yes, I want it: just to fall down and die.  
 S: Why do you wish to die?  
 D: Because living is not nice. *Asetena no mu nyè fê*. Imagine not seeing people.  
 S: But people are caring for you.  
 D: Yes, they are caring for me.  
 S: Then why?  
 D: Because I am a problem to them, I am making them too tired. *Èyè saa a na mama wòn reberè dodo*.

Òkyeame<sup>5</sup> Opoku (O), in a discussion with Patrick (P), said that to die after one has prepared oneself is not a problem: not to die is a problem.

- O: When you see that you are old and may die anytime, you have to make the necessary arrangements to prevent problems after your death. For example, you can choose your successor.  
 P: After making the necessary arrangements, do you look forward to death?  
 O: After [making] proper arrangements (*Wo toto wo nèma wie a*) you are not afraid if death will come in the morning, afternoon or evening. What I am afraid of is to lie in bed for a long time with sickness, but if you become old and die peacefully, it is a nice thing (*èyè anigyè deè koraa*).  
 P: Does the thought of death not frighten you?  
 O: Whether you are afraid or not, you will die. You should not worry about your death (*ènsè sè wo fò wo ho sè wobewu koraa*). As long as you grow old, you must die, so there is no need to be afraid. Some people do a lot of bad things, which makes them suffer for a long time before they die. They are punished before their death. They wish to die and be relieved but they don't get [relief] because of their wrongdoings.  
 P: Does it mean that death can be a relief to some people?  
 O: Some people wish to die but they don't because of their wrongdoings. Some people can have part of their body rotten but they don't die because they are being punished.

The 'terror of death' (Becker 1973) does not seem to affect older people. Death is not a 'nasty five letter possibility' (Schulz 1980: 239) but rather a welcome guest, a friend. But should we believe the elders? Elsewhere I have argued that the *òpanyin* (elder) is someone who should show self-restraint and control of his or her emotions (Van der Geest 1998b). It does not befit the elder to be anxious about anything, whether hunger, gossip, sex or jealousy. The elder is 'cool and collected', as a lorry inscription in Twi-inspired English reads. The only persistent worry for the elder is to preserve or restore peace in the family. It is that code of restraint and good manners which may also prevent him from expressing anxiety about death. A real *òpanyin* does not show any fear of death, for he is ready for it. His death should be as dignified as his life. In the remainder of this paper, I hope to

demonstrate that to elders the concept of a ‘welcome death’ is not merely a facade commanded by the cultural code, but does overwhelmingly characterise the local attitude towards death.

### ‘Good death’ and ‘bad death’

During one of my stays in Kwahu-Tafo, the dead body of a young man, a member of the family household where I was lodging, was brought home to be buried. The stories about his death were confusing and contradictory: some said he was killed by robbers on his way to Abidjan. His death was senseless. Why did he go to Abidjan at all? ‘He died without a good cause’, as someone said. His death was violent, untimely and served no purpose. A typical example of a ‘bad death’ (*owu bône*). It is the type of death which is described in many Highlife songs, as tragic and ‘unnecessary’ (the essence of the tragedy). Those around suspect evil intention or a punishment, for why else should the person have died?

A ‘bad death’ is in its widest sense one which comes too early, which terminates the life of someone who has not yet completed his course, has not yet come to full maturity. Miescher (1997: 529) writes that bad or accidental death (*òtòfo wu*) includes: ‘deaths caused by accidents or suicides, by certain illnesses (tuberculosis, syphilis or leprosy), or during childbirth’ (see also Sarpong 1974: 35; Baaré 1986: 55–56). Bartle (1977: 378), writing about the Kwahu town of Obo, remarked that – traditionally – a woman’s death during childbirth was the worst of all deaths:

If the woman dies during childbirth she is despised, her death is seen as a cowardly act worse than suicide, for she kills the child while she should be doing her most honourable duty of bringing forth. Like other *otofo* (bad death) corpses, hers was thrown in the bush where other pregnant women come to hurl abuse, spit and epithets while pointing plantain leaves at her.

Bartle added, nowadays ‘the corpse is put in a box and buried with minimal ceremony, while the shameful nature of her death is hidden or softened by euphemistic circumlocution’. Still on ‘bad death’, *Òpanyin* Frempong spoke of a death at ‘tender age’, as a life ‘forced to break suddenly’ (*wabu abugyen*). The ‘badness’ of premature death is particularly felt if the deceased himself carries responsibility for his early death. One woman pointed to people who kill themselves by taking poison.

A ‘bad death’ could be called a ‘good death’ in one sense, that it produces the strongest emotions. In her study of funeral celebrations in

Asante, Marleen de Witte (2001: 92–93) describes the dramatic funeral (*soroku*) of a young man who had died at the age of 28 years. The scene was a pandemonium of vehement crying, shouting, tooting horns, men in women's dress, and fighting around the grave. One woman was waving condoms indicating the incompleteness of the young man's life. In 1971 and 1973 I witnessed similar scenes at several funerals, one of *Ōpanyin* Frempong's wife (Bleek 1975: 57–69). The proverb quoted by several authors, that one should not rush to attend the funeral of someone who has 'stumbled to his death' (*Nea wahintiw awu no, wontutu nkò n'ayi ase*), describes best etiquette more than the actual practice. A 'stumbling to death' or accidental death (*òtòfo wu*) may be shameful, but that does not prevent people from rushing to it. Rather, the large attendance and emotional 'success' of such funerals shrouds the death's shameful character.

'Bad deaths' help bring the concept of a 'good death' (*owu pa*) into sharp focus: it is a death which *is* necessary because the allotted time is up and the person has lived his life to the end. *Ōpanyin* Frempong put it beautifully in a metaphor for the dead trunk of a tree in the forest, one that did not die of disease or fire but reached its end in a natural way. On the same idea, Opoku said, 'A good death is when a person dies a natural death, after having put his things in order. Good death, therefore, is the best crown for an *òpanyin's* life (a successful funeral is the second)'.

### **Agnosticism**

'Spiritually we can't tell where a dead person is. That secret is between the dead and God. Whatever some may say on the subject is just imaginary.' Thus *Ōpanyin* Frempong summarised his view on what happens when a person dies: we do not know, and if somebody claims he knows, he is just using fantasy. He then continued to quote from The Bible, which I found him reading everyday, to support his agnostic stand. Frempong was not alone in his acknowledgement that nothing can be said with certainty about the dead. All older people whom we invited to give their views on death and being dead declined to do so. *Òkyeame* Opoku said:

A person is buried after death and he does not know what happens next. They have been saying that after his death a good person goes to a good place (*baabi pa*), but if you did bad things, you can't go there. You will be roaming about. I have never died, so I don't know how it looks like, but that is what we hear (laughing). It is a saying – no one has been there to know the truth. We have to take it so.

When Patrick asked Mary Dedaa if she believed there was punishment or reward for people after death, she replied: ‘If there is punishment, it is only God who can tell’. People say that the dead go to *Asamando*, the place of the spirits, but that is just a word, a way of referring to something, they do not know.<sup>6</sup> The most frequent statement in our discussions on death was indeed, ‘We don’t know’.

Of course there was ambivalence and contradiction. Some recited a general Christian truth about life after death, but when the discussion continued, agnostic statements took over. On the one hand, as we have seen, death is near and familiar, a welcome guest; on the other hand, it is a complete stranger. This is not surprising, for Ghana is a religious country. Christian churches abound, pious texts are found on houses, signboards and cars, and one finds people reading The Bible everywhere. One would probably expect that popular Christian ideas about Heaven and Hell and reward and punishment after death were commonly accepted. But they were not.

What is commonly accepted is the existence of God: the name of God is used profusely without any signs of agnosticism. That God exists is obvious, and the idea that He would not is thought to be too weird for words. When I discussed a text on witchcraft with my friend Boamah, he first wanted to know whether I believed in ‘juju’ and ‘witchcraft’. I explained that I did not know: perhaps they existed, perhaps they did not. Both were possible. I then added that he could as well have asked me whether I believed in God. He looked at me in surprise; to him it was unthinkable that someone would not believe. I found that same attitude during my conversations with *Òpanyin* Frempong. The old man swept away all ‘superstitions’ about ghosts and ancestors, but spoke about God as if He was sitting in the chair next to him.

The research focused however on older people and not on religion. I never pursued the quest into agnosticism to find out whether the elders, when their philosophy was pressed, would apply the same rationalist principles to God as to life after death. My only purpose was to explore how the older people looked at their approaching end. I found them to be surprisingly realistic and rationalistic. They accepted death as a natural and welcome completion of their life, while acknowledging that they had no idea what would happen to them after death. That agnostic stand worked in two directions: they did not subscribe to pious Christian solutions for life after death, however pious they were themselves, nor did they entertain the other extreme, denial of the possibility of a continuation of some kind of existence. When Patrick confronted Mary Dedaa with the famous Highlife line, *Onipa wu a, na wawu* (if someone dies he is dead), she replied: ‘*Onipa wu a,*

*onwuyè* (if someone dies he is not yet dead), because after the death of some people, their children and grandchildren are protected from many troubles'. To simply say, 'dead is dead' was not acceptable to her either.

### **Life after death**

When Patrick asked *Òpanyin* Frempong whether our way of living decides our fate after death, an interesting misunderstanding arose. Patrick held a completely different conception of 'life after death' than the old man, who firmly stuck to his 'this world' view, as when he answered:

Yes. The kind of life a person leads can have an effect on his offspring after his death. If the fellow was good, his children will be blessed and have a lot of success, but if he was bad, a lot of evil can hit his offspring. It may be the children, the grandchildren or even the great grandchildren. History confirms what I say; many people enjoy the fruits of the good things their parents did and others suffer because of their parents' evil. The Bible also says, 'I am a God who is jealous and I look upon later sons and generations who hate me with the evils of their fathers'.

A few moments later, he spoke of death and life itself as punishment and reward:

Some deaths are punishments to wrongdoers. When a person is doing much evil on earth, God can take him away to stop the wrongs he is committing against others. Such a death is a punishment to the dead. God can also allow a good person to live longer, to serve as an example to others.

*Òkyeame* Opoku said a similar thing: 'Some people are afraid because of their wrongdoings. The slightest illness worries them because they are afraid they may die because of the wrong they have committed'. By keeping 'life after death' a mundane affair, namely the life of those who remain behind after the death of an older relative, our conversation partners were able to combine their agnostic realism with expressions of the concept that is a key to understanding old age: *reciprocity*. Death and what happens thereafter are tightly connected with people's view of life as a matter of checks and balances, of giving and taking, of paying and being paid. As Opoku said, 'There is a reward for everything you do, good or bad'.

When he made remarks about the poor care allotted to some older or sick people which may hasten their death, I asked him under what circumstances such a thing would happen. He answered: 'It depends

on the sort of life the sick person led before he became sick. A person who looked after his children very well will never experience such a thing. The children will do everything they can to make you comfortable till you die. But if you did not look after them, how can they take care of you when you are sick?’

Another form of reciprocity becomes visible immediately after death, according again to Opoku. When Patrick asked him if after death a person would profit from the good things he did on earth, he answered: ‘Yes: people to whom he showed kindness during his life will attend his funeral and help his relatives by contributing towards the funeral’. The retribution takes place before death, in death and after death, although the system of ‘making accounts’ can differ. In *Òpanyin* Frempong’s view, children and grandchildren may have to pay for the wrongs of their parents and grandparents. After death, justice will also be rendered in another sense. Patrick asked Opoku for the meaning of the proverb, *Sè wowu ansa na wo hia ne wo sika dan adi* (your money or your poverty becomes public after your death). He replied:

A person may look quite wealthy during his lifetime, but after his death people and banks will start asking the *abusua* [family] to pay some of his debts. When he was alive, nobody knew he was poor. A person’s box is opened after his death by others, and whatever is inside is made public. It is possible that a person who many people thought to be very poor is found to be in the possession of riches. (Compare the proverb, *Apòkkyerène wu a, na wohu ne tenten* – After the frog has died, you see how long it is).

So far, people’s mundane, ‘this world’, and secularist perspectives on life after death have been highlighted, perhaps to excess. My account may give a too ‘clear’ and ‘definitive’ picture of these popular beliefs. Alongside the quoted pronouncements, I also heard people saying more ambivalent things that carried suggestions of a life after death ‘somewhere else’. For example, after Opoku’s remark about contributing to the funeral as a reward for a good life, he continued: ‘If the person is a wrongdoer, he will be punished. He will not get the chance of going to God. He will be roaming, appearing to people and frightening them. We call such a person *òtòfòd*’. Uncertainty and contradiction are ‘logical’ when talking about death and its aftermath.

### **Ancestors**

Ancestors are addressed and referred to by the same term as that used for living grandparents: *Nananom*.<sup>7</sup> The way in which this word is carried over the border of death suggests a continued nearness and the

concretely experienced presence of the ancestors. That image of the 'living dead' is also conveyed by many publications on religion in Africa, among the Akan in particular (*e.g.* Brain 1971; Middleton 1960; Kirby 1986; Sarpong 1974). A continuum of living and dead ancestors also makes sense when studying the position of elders and the respect allotted to them. Older people are almost ancestors: they are about to join the honourable ranks of the matrilineal forbears to whom people pray and pour libations. It explains their style of behaviour at the end of their life: worthy, civilised and kind.<sup>8</sup> Yet what exactly do people intend when they address their ancestors, and how do the older people perceive the status of ancestor?

We asked *Òkyeame* Opoku why he poured libation and reserved food for the ancestors, since he would himself eat it in the evening. Did he think that the ancestors were still alive somewhere, and that they would really eat and drink? For the first time in the course of our conversations, we noticed uncertainty and hesitation, and then he frankly admitted that he did not know. No one had ever returned from death to tell him what death looked like. So why did he pour libation? To remember the ancestors, he said: to be remembered after one's death is a continuation of the respect one enjoyed during life. It is the only certainty we have about people's fate after death: some are forgotten and some are remembered. Forgotten are those who did not achieve anything important in their life. They did not leave something behind which makes people think of them long after they have gone: a farm, precious property, children in a high position or a house.<sup>9</sup> Remembered are those who had left an imprint before they died. Nonetheless, people's remarks on the status and role of ancestors were quite inconsistent. Most outspoken was *Òpanyin* Frempong, who squarely denied the possibility that ancestors exert influence on the living: 'There is nothing a dead [person] can do for us on earth. It is only God who can do something. ... If people claim that their mother's spirit is helping them, they are wrong, it is God who is doing this for them'.

Opoku, as we have seen, stresses the act of remembering, which in itself has an emotional value. Knowing that your children and grandchildren will remember you after your death, because of what you achieved in life and did for them, gives satisfaction and happiness to the older person. Libations, funeral anniversaries, pictures, tombs, houses and inscriptions on the wall: all contribute to the remembrance and help to maintain the concept of ancestor. Such a mnemonic conception of ancestor sheds light on the cultural codes in the life of an *òpanyin*. The kind and reconciliatory comportment of the elder is a subtle invitation to start remembering him or her. A few moments

later, Opoku expressed more ‘conventional’ ideas on ancestors, for example, in the remark about wandering spirits (*òtòfòò*) quoted before. Similar remarks, swinging between traditional beliefs and critical personal reflections, were brought up by others. In conclusion, while ancestorship is shrouded in a *clair-obscur*, three strong convictions are widely held. First, it is hard to believe that death *is* really the end of everything; there must be something, somewhere, somehow. Secondly, good should be rewarded and evil punished: the concept of ancestor helps this principle to function (but as we have seen reciprocity can survive without the belief in active ancestral agents). Thirdly, the concept of ancestor facilitates remembering.

Teacher Mensah, a prominent member of the Presbyterian Church, was the most outspoken believer in the living existence of ancestors, as in the following conversation with him (M) a few months before he died in 1995:

- S: Do you believe that the ancestors are still guarding our life?  
 M: Yes, I do, because when we are pouring libation, we call upon the good ancestors to come and bless.  
 S: Do they help us in our life? Do you believe the ancestors help us in our life?  
 M: Yes, I do, because of reincarnation.  
 S: Is it also true, perhaps, that the old people are almost like the ancestors? Are they already sharing in the power of the ancestors?  
 M: Yes, I do through my imagination and dreams. I once dreamt that my mother asked me about the situation at home. She wanted to find out how we are facing life, whether we are still in difficulties or whether our life is enjoyable.

### **Reincarnation (*òkòba*)**

In courses and books on the Akan religion, one finds chapters devoted to reincarnation but the concept is always aloof and speculative. The belief exists in some form, but never during my previous stays in the community had its presence been observed nor its religious significance witnessed (as had been the case for the belief in witchcraft – *bayie*). During our conversations with older people, however, for the first time the belief in reincarnation was vividly revealed. It proved to contain the most clearly expressed ideas about a dimension of life after death. The informants gave us very specific information, and provided concrete examples of reborn children. For the anticipation of their own death, however, those ideas seemed to have little significance.

*Òpanyin* Frempong in his conversation with Patrick expressed his scepticism about most beliefs in life after death, but when it came to reincarnation, he suddenly changed his view. Christian texts ('Those who lead a good life will come and inherit this world'), and traditional fragments ('People who observe him closely are able to establish that he is a dead relative who has been born again') were mingled into a Lévi-Straussian *bricolage*. Frempong's evidence for the factual existence of reincarnation was clever:

Why is it that when two children are learning the same thing, one is better able to master it than the other? It means that the one who learns faster is in the world for a second time. Two people may have the same degree in a certain field, but one may still be brighter than the other. That means that the brighter one is in the world for a second time.

For the others, reincarnation was interesting primarily because it reminded them of a certain person who was a 'returnee', an *òkòba* ('he has gone and come'). The idea that someone in their midst had lived and died before was clearly fascinating.<sup>10</sup> Mary Dedaa gave the following account:

I visited my son at Asiakwa several years ago and [he] showed me a certain woman who was one of such people. The story goes that [her] mother had eight daughters and they all died in succession. So when the eighth child died, those who buried it inflicted some injuries under the sole of the feet, probably with thorns. When the ninth child (who was that woman) was born, she was unable to put the soles of her feet on the ground when it came to the time for her to walk. No one understood why, until a *bosom* (fetish) told them the reason, and suggested the parents get her some footwear. The woman was unable to put her bare feet on the ground throughout her life. I saw the woman myself. The only time she was without sandals was when bathing and sleeping. It is true: an *òkòba* can deceive you. If you inflict serious injuries on it, it will come back with them.

*Òkyeame* Opoku claimed that his own son was an *òkòba*: 'Even my own son came a second time. He was formerly known as Kwaku Donkor or Kwaku Mosi.<sup>11</sup> I know this because he looked exactly the same as the first one'.

### Christian ideas

Christian ideas about death and the hereafter are taught in sermons, prayers and hymns in churches and in popular literature. Prominent in those teachings are the concepts of heaven (*òsoro*), hell (*òbonsam kurom*;

literally the devil's town), purgatory (*mfinimfniha*; literally the in-between), and Judgement Day (*Atemmuo*). One's destiny after death is determined by the type of life one has led and by one's faith. De Witte (2001: 30) quotes a leaflet from the Ghana Bible Society: 'whether a person will have eternal life after death depends on whether he believes ... that Jesus died for us to reconcile us'. But none of the elders produced such theological accounts in our conversations. Fragments of Christian ideas were heard several times, sometimes intelligently built into an argument, as by *Ōpanyin* Frempong:

As we don't know where we came from, we can't know where we shall go to. When we go back to The Bible, we learn how the Jews tested Jesus with the story of the seven brothers who married the same woman, one after the other, because they all died. Jesus told them that there is no marriage after death but everyone will live like an angel.

In other accounts, the Christian references seem incoherent and difficult to understand in the context of the entire conversation. Monica Dedaa, for example, told us that we do good in order to get a good place to stay over there. When we asked her where that place was, she answered: 'In heaven, Our Father's place. Everyone's Father is in heaven and our Mother Mary is on earth'. When we asked further about her beliefs, Mary Dedaa answered: 'Now that I am a Christian, I know that when I die, it is God who has called me. I don't know if I will go to Him or [whether] He will send me to another land'. Even *Ōkyeame* Opoku, the only elder who did not claim to be a Christian, knows something about the Christian faith:

According to you Christians, God did not create man to die but it was through the faults of Adam that death came to the world. But it is something arranged by God so it is difficult to understand.

According to my friend Boamah, people feel attracted to Christian churches when they grow old because they offer a decent, orderly and worthy funeral. Another reason may be that church members help older people materially and visit them, probably a welcome change in their dreary existence. The Catholic Church in Kwahu-Tafo, for example, has a St Vincent de Paul Society which carries out several charitable activities among older, sick and poor people. It is of course not surprising that people who joined a Christian church at an older age have not internalised that church's teachings on life after death. The concepts of purgatory and hell were never mentioned during our conversations. On the whole I suspect that the Christian doctrine has hardly changed people's outlook on death. The references to

Christianity are admittedly sketchy, but that in itself is significant. My two co-researchers, who put their stamp on the conversations, were both devout Catholics and were often probing the elders for signs of Christian teaching. Most of the time the elders did not respond to the prompts. A most remarkable finding is that some local religious concepts have received Christian terms without much change in their original meaning.<sup>12</sup>

### **Euthanasia**

Early in the fieldwork, a German lady who had been living in Ghana for about thirty years confronted the author with her opinions about the life of older people in Ghana. She said that it was misguided to expect their lives to be more pleasant and comfortable than those of older people in my own country. The only positive thing I would discover, she predicted, was that old people in Ghana are allowed to die, their lives are not unduly prolonged by medical intervention and, on occasion, enforced artificial feeding. The wish of Ghanaian elders to die was respected, she said. Relatives would place food in front of them, and if they refused to take it, they were not forced. The lack of good medical facilities and poverty, particularly in the rural areas, were blessings in disguise. They saved older people from the torture of forcibly extended lives, which their peers in Europe and North America suffered.

A few days later I met a Ghanaian sociologist with degrees from Canada and the United States, and we discussed intended and contrived deaths among older people. I quote from my field notes:

He stresses that in the olden days people who are too much of a burden to their family would be ‘cleared’, that is killed, for example, by poison. Malformed babies were killed by giving them *akpeteshie*<sup>13</sup> to drink. Old people who felt they had become a burden might also ask to be killed. One expression indicating that the old person no longer wished to live was: *mabrè* (I am tired). The ultimate phase for a person would be incontinence: ‘sleeping in the toilet’ is the end. A person would feel so disgraced that he would rather die. The decision to kill an old person is a family decision which will be taken by only a handful of intimates. If it became known, the people would be in trouble because this type of killing is strictly forbidden by the law. He cites an example from another town. There are strong rumours that a certain business woman was killed by her own daughter, after the family had taken the decision.<sup>14</sup>

These two people were the first *and* – except for one person – the last who tried to convince me that a form of euthanasia existed in Ghana.

After I had arrived in Kwahu, every time I brought up the topic, it was denied categorically. A headmaster listened to my account of how older people in my country were kept alive at all costs and by any technical means, even without their consent. When I had finished, he said: ‘We in Ghana would do the same, if we had the means. I would fight for my mother’s life till the end. Unless the doctor says it is over. I will fight as long as she breathes, until she says ‘hmmm’. It is not true that we put the food in front of someone and refuse to feed him if he cannot eat himself. I will spoon feed her, wash her, take her to toilet, everything’. *Òpanyin* Frempong made only a brief remark about ‘merciful killing’. He thought it may have happened in the past to children with a ‘defect’, but that was wrong. He did not believe it still occurred today.

I asked Teacher Mensah (M) what he thought of voluntary death. The following discussion ensued:

M: It is perfectly good. At the moment one of my uncles is sick, so weak that he is praying God to give him away. He is not alone: all the older sick people in bed are craving for death. Especially those who can’t control their bowels.

S: Will the family sometimes help you to die?

M: The family cannot help.

S: Have you ever heard the rumour that some people quietly use poison?

M: The suffering person can do it, if he gets access to the poison, but not an outsider.

S: If you, for example, found yourself in such a situation, could you ask your wife to find some poison for you?

M: No, no, she wouldn’t do that. She wouldn’t like to hear of it.

S: Because she loves you?

M: If she loves you, the love is a reason for not doing it.

S: You have never heard of something of this sort happening?

M: I have never come across it ... so I cannot tell you of any instance.

His friend Kwaku Martin was more sympathetic towards the idea, but stressed that it was not possible:

You yourself, [and] the sick may be fed up, and the carer may also feel the same thing. So if you think there is no proper help, you’d rather die than stay. To die is to gain. After all, if I am gone I won’t feel anything. But I don’t think you will get someone to help you to die. It would mean going against the rules of God. Jesus Christ said he came to help but not to destroy. So when you help a person to die, that means you’ve destroyed one of the sons of God.

Mr Asare rejected the idea squarely: ‘It is against the laws of both God and humanity’. The son of an old, demented and incontinent woman said he would never consider something like euthanasia. He would just wait for the work of Providence. It was evil, like suicide. He actually

knew quite a number of suicide cases, but euthanasia – no. Mary Dedaa gave a concrete explanation for the fact that no one will be prepared to help an old person to die: such a person would contract the sins and the disease of the one dying. Patrick asked her: ‘Ma’me, if someone is sick in bed for a long time, and has a lot of pain, do people sometimes help such a person to die?’ She replied:

- D: The only help people can give such a person is to take him to the hospital. If he does not get well and the doctor sends him back home, it is the duty of the relatives to care for him, till God calls him.  
P: Have you ever heard that people help a sick relative to die?  
D: I have never heard such a thing. Ei! It is not good.  
P: Why is not good?  
D: If you help him, his sins will come on you (*woyè saa a na woagye ne bône asoa*).

The only people in the town of Kwahu-Tafo who told me that older people who become very pitiful (demented, incontinent) were sometimes killed were ‘station boys’. One of them remarked:

When someone grows very old and starts to do things like a very small child it is good [that] he goes. For example, when my grandfather became very old, at times he could wake up in the night and start to shout that some people were raiding his room, which was not true. When you went there and asked him where the raiders were, he would tell you, ‘Look can’t you see them climbing the wall?’ So I think it was better that he went.

I asked them if they had ever heard of someone, for example, a relative, who had helped an aged person to die because he thought they had become too much a burden. Here are some of their answers:

Yes, it happens. Some people can even poison an aged person who has become a burden. *Wòde aduro gu aduane mu ma wòn*. They put some poison in their food.

Yes, I know one instance when a certain rich woman thought that her brother who was an epileptic patient had become such a burden to her that she arranged with a doctor to poison him by injection. He gave him a bad injection (*òbòò no paneè bône*). The relatives gave him a fitting funeral but, at the back of their minds, they were happy that he had gone.

Some families can meet secretly and plan the death of person who has become a problem or burden.

I think it happens often but we don’t find out because no one takes the trouble to have a post-mortem examination on very old people. They just say he died because of old age.

My cautious conclusion is that euthanasia is indeed rejected on ethical and religious grounds although occasional cases undoubtedly occur. Both the sick or older person and those caring for him may wish his death, but they will find it impossible to do something because they fear the consequences. Here again some form of reciprocity, a principle ('You do not take the life of the one who gave it to you'), and a concern ('The sins of the dying person will pass to the one killing him as some kind of contagion') are at play. In the rural community of Kwahu-Tafo, euthanasia is not an issue.

### **Conclusion**

In his introduction to the *Sociology of Death*, Clark (1993: 3) points out that death is more than the final closure of life. In death, life also unfolds: it shows the dying person's relationship with others and his place in society. His death and what follows is an expression of his successes and/or failures in life and of his religious beliefs. Death brings into the open emotions and invites celebrations of life. Death, in short, is a sociological (and anthropological) issue *par excellence*.

I found this to be very true for the attitude towards death and the style of dying among the older people in Kwahu-Tafo. Our conversations revealed a calm acceptance of death as a good and natural end to their long lives. They saw death as a guest that they looked forward to meeting. Their resignation to death contrasted sharply with the sometimes aggressive resistance to death that is encountered in Highlife songs and at funeral celebrations. Death is feared and cursed by those who are far away from it, the young, but embraced by those who are near it. Somewhat paradoxically, the absence of fear about death among the older people coincides with an openly expressed agnosticism as to what will happen after death. Christian beliefs about retribution and reward (heaven, purgatory, hell and the judgement day) were hardly mentioned. In most cases, 'life after death' was understood in terms of 'this world': the lives of those who stayed behind after the death of the deceased. Ancestorhood was mainly understood as a state of being remembered for one's good deeds and successful life. Reincarnation, and in particular the return of children, was generally accepted. Several of my informants remembered specific examples of such reborn children.

Seale (2000: 926–27) contrasts 'religious' and 'scientific' views of death. The contrast could be misleading, as science can turn into scientism and assume religious significance. In one sense, however, the

opposition is meaningful. In ‘western’ cultures, death has become an almost unattainable goal as people are barred from it by technology, judiciary and religious groups. The ‘awareness of dying’, to use Glaser and Strauss’s (1965) concept, is limited. Palliative care, however beneficial in alleviating suffering, adds to the decreasing awareness (*cf.* Seale *et al.* 1997). The denial and medicalisation of death, noticed by Littlewood (1993) and many others, is practically absent among older people in Kwahu-Tafo. They are aware of their approaching death and long for it. Their children and relatives may lament their death and claim that they would have done anything within their means to prolong their lives, but that claim is mainly an expression of grief. They do not have the means to postpone death. In their situation, euthanasia is a ‘superfluous’ option. Death will come anyway.

Euthanasia was almost universally rejected for moral and religious reasons, but rumours about mercy killing were heard. Informants believed that the sickness and handicaps of a person killed in this way would be transmitted to the one who carried it out. Although the wish to die was common, all informants indicated that death was not something people could decide about themselves. The relatives of older people emphasised that they would do everything they could to keep the person alive. If they had the means, they would do the same as us (Europeans), and take a sick and fragile parent from hospital to hospital to keep him or her alive as long as possible. From the point of view of the older people, dying with dignity suits their status as *ɔpanyin*. They demonstrate a readiness to die and look forward to that moment (‘I want to go’).

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## NOTES

- 1 *Òpanyin* (pl. *mpanyimfò*) is an honorific term used for people beyond the age of about 50 years. More than an indication of age, it carries a positive appreciation of the person: his/her wisdom, kindness, refined manners and political importance. See further Stucki 1995; Apt 1996; and Van der Geest 1998*b*. Here and in the *Twi* quotations, the letters è (pronounced as in ‘let’) and ò (as in ‘not’) replace *Twi* characters which could not be reproduced.
- 2 Other Akan groups include the Asante, Fante, Akyem, Akuapem, Bono and several other smaller groups. Important studies of Akan culture include those by Rattray (1923; 1927; 1929), Danquah (1928), Busia (1951), Field (1960), Fortes (1969), Arhin (1979), and Oppong (1982). Studies dealing with Kwahu society include Bleek (1975; 1976), Bartle (1977) and Miescher (1997).
- 3 These themes have been dealt with in other publications: *e.g.* Van der Geest (1995; 1997*a*; 1997*b*; 1998*a*; 1998*b*).
- 4 ‘Highlife’ is popular music, a blend of traditional rhythms and melodies with European musical elements. It encompasses a variety of artistic expressions: instrumental music, songs, dancing and theatre. On Highlife songs and death, see Van der Geest (1980; 1984; Yankah 1984; and Brempong 1986: 389–440).
- 5 *Òkyeame* (often translated as ‘linguist’) is an official at the chief’s court. Yankah (1995: 3) describes the function of the *òkyeame* as ‘speaking for the chief’: ‘being a counsellor and intermediary to the chief, he is responsible, among other things, for enhancing the rhetoric of the words the chief has spoken. In the absence of an *òkyeame*’s editorial art, the royal speech act is considered functionally and artistically incomplete’.
- 6 In one Highlife song the singer plays as follows with the word ‘place’ (*baabi*) where the dead go (quoted from Yankah 1984: 578):  
 Man has a place to go.  
 When cassava is planted, it germinates on the fall of rain,  
 But when man is interred, he never returns.  
 Man has a place to go.
- 7 *Nana* (lit. ‘grandparent’) is an honorific term for an older person, an ancestor or a chief.
- 8 Kirby (1986: 82), in a study of an Anufò community in Northern Ghana, provides a striking description of ancestor-oriented life: ‘All of life is a procession of events in stages toward becoming an elder and death. But this is not considered the end of the person. Rather it is the gateway to ancestorhood – the ultimate goal of every Anufò. In a sense, ancestorhood is a more normal human state than corporal existence on earth’. McCormack (1985), in a short paper on Sherbo older people in Sierra Leone, emphasises the ‘unbroken genealogical continuum’ between the living and the dead. Senility before death is a sign that the elder is already entering ancestorhood.
- 9 Building a house to be remembered is discussed in Van der Geest (1998*a*).
- 10 The theme of a reborn child also fascinated the Nigerian writer Ben Okri (1991) in his novel, *The Famished Road*.
- 11 ‘*Donkor*’ means slave. ‘*Mosi*’, the name of an ethnic group in Burkina Faso, is also derogatory in southern Ghana, where *Mosi* people work as migrant labourers.
- 12 For an interesting discussion of the Christian ‘translation’ of traditional religious concepts in Ghana, see Meyer (1999).
- 13 *Akpeteshie* is a locally distilled drink.
- 14 When Boamah read these lines, he remembered a rumour some years ago that an older woman was killed in a nearby town. The suspicion arose because shortly

after her death someone else caught the same disease as the lady had suffered from. People took this as an indication that the person had actually killed her.

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