

Funerals for the Living: Conversations with Elderly People in Kwahu, Ghana

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Abstract: To understand the grandness and emotion of Ghanaian funerals we need to look at the living rather than the deceased; we should think less of religion and more of politics, particularly the politics of reputation. The author takes the discrepancy between premortem and postmortem care as a starting point for his exploration of the meaning of funerals in a rural Akan community of Southern Ghana. The essay is based on conversations with elderly and younger people and on personal observations and attendance at funerals during anthropological fieldwork. Funerals are first and foremost occasions for the family to affirm its prestige and to celebrate its excellence. When thinking about their own funeral, the elderly are ambivalent. On the one hand, they criticize the overemphasis on funerals at the expense of proper care during their lives. On the other hand, they would certainly not want to turn the tables. For them, too, a poor funeral would be an unbearable disgrace.

Résumé: Afin de comprendre la grandeur et l'émotion des funérailles ghanéennes, il nous faut regarder les vivants plutôt que les morts; nous devrions penser moins à la religion et plus à la politique, ou plus précisément aux politiques de réputation. L'auteur prend comme point de départ pour son exploration de la signification des funérailles la contradiction entre les soins pre-mortem et post-mortem dans une communauté rurale Akan de la Guinée du sud. Cet article se base sur des conversations avec des personnes âgées et plus jeunes, ainsi que sur des observations personnelles recueillies lors de funérailles auxquelles l'auteur a assisté lors de sa recherche anthropologique sur le terrain. Les funérailles sont tout d'abord une occasion pour la famille d'affirmer son prestige et de célébrer son excellence.

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Quand ils pensent à leurs propres funérailles, les personnes âgées ont une réponse ambivalente. D'un côté ils critiquent l'importance exagérée donnée aux funérailles au détriment de soins décents dont ils aimeraient bénéficier pendant qu'ils sont vivants; de l'autre ils ne voudraient certainement rien changer. Pour eux, également, des funérailles médiocres seraient une disgrâce insoutenable.

Funerals are—and always have been—the main social event in the Akan society of Ghana.¹ Almost three centuries ago (in 1705) the Dutch traveler Willem Bosman wrote the following observations about death and funerals on the Gold Coast:

As soon as a sick Person is expired, they set up a dismal Crying, Lamentation and Squeaking, that the whole Town is filled with it.... If the Deceased be a Man, his Wives immediately shave their Heads very close, and smear their Bodies with white Earth, and put on an old worn-out Garment; thus adjusted they run about Street like mad Women, or rather She-Furies, with their Hair Hanging upon their Cloathes; withal making a very dismal and lamentable Noise, continually repeating the name of the Dead, and reciting the great Actions of his past Life: And this confused Tumultuary Noise of the Women lasts several Days successively, even till the Corps is buried....

The distant Relations also assemble from all Places, to be present at these Mourning Rites; he that is negligent herein being sure to bleed freely if he cannot urge lawful Reasons for his absence.

The Towns People and Acquaintance of the Deceased, come also to join their Lamentations, each bringing his Present of Gold, Brandy, fine Cloath, Sheets, or something else; which... is given to be carried to the Grave with the Corps; and the larger Present of this Nature any Person makes, the more it redounds to his Honour and Reputation. ([1967]:228–30)

One hundred years later (in 1812) another visitor to the Gold Coast wrote: “There is great attention shewn in this country to the dead, and in proportion to rank, family, or the situation the person was in. The body is exposed to public view, decorated with the riches and ornaments of the country...” (Meredith 1967:31–32).

In 1853, Cruickshank ([1966]:219–20), one of the earliest observers of Akan funerals, noticed that it was “a point of honor to make a great show at their funeral customs, and they vie with each other in performing these expensive burials. Even the poorest will pawn and enslave themselves to obtain the means of burying a relation decently, according to the ideas of country.” Much of Cruickshank’s account emphasizes the intensity of grief and the universal pain of mourning.

We have seen a mother suddenly bereaved of her child perfectly frantic with despair, violently beating her breast, and uttering sharp agonizing screams, as the most acute bodily suffering could alone seem fit to elicit. The sting of a serpent, or the application of some horrible instrument of torture, could not produce more excruciating distortions than we behold them suffering, while writhing under the first stroke of their bereavement.

The African seems to understand well the hopelessness of administering consolation, until the first paroxysm of grief be past. They pity and respect the mourner, but never obtrude a word of sympathy or comfort until the first natural impulse of the heart has had time to assuage itself. ([1966]:214–15)

But he also describes what to a European like himself must have been a striking and amazing feature of funerals, their boisterousness: “These Saturnalia often last for days and weeks, and are attended with scenes of great drunkenness and confusion” (217). Finally, Cruickshank writes that considerable sums of money and gifts were presented during funerals, including food that mostly was consumed on the spot.

Rattray’s (1927:147–66) chapter, “Funeral rites for ordinary individuals,” in his *Religion and Art in Ashanti* is a classic reference. Much of his description sounds more or less similar to today’s funerals. The corpse is washed and laid in state in his or her best clothes. There is drumming, dancing, singing, weeping, and “jollity.”

Every one generally becomes very drunk, but we should not pass a very severe judgement on this account. Grief and sorrow are very real where the clan (blood) relations are concerned, for the tears demanded by social custom are none the less a token of genuine grief. For others, not clansmen and women, such occasions are perhaps not so tragic, and on this account these rites may seem to the uninstructed to be somewhat heartless shows, as mirth and jollity are not altogether absent. (151)

Some details in Rattray’s account—and also in that of other writers such as Danquah (1928), Christensen (1954), Nketia (1955), Lystad (1958), and Mends (1978)—are not observed in today’s funerals: the shooting of guns, the presentation of elaborate meals to the deceased, fasting and shaving of hair by close relatives, harsh treatment of the widow, and “carrying the corpse” (*funu soa*), a ritual practice to find the witch (*bayifoo*) responsible for the death. Some of these practices were outlawed or discouraged by the colonial government. The burial of important elders under the floor of the house (see also Cruickshank 1966:218) was also prohibited and is no longer practiced. But it is remarkable that most observers pay considerable attention to the expenses of funerals and how they are recovered by those who bear the financial burden, the members of the *abusua*. Rattray notes some of the final words to the deceased that were spoken in his time before the

coffin was closed: "Let us get money to pay for the expenses we have made" (160).

By midcentury, Nketia (1954:48) indicated that the lavish displays at funerals had not changed: "The celebration of a funeral is regarded as a duty and no pains are spared to make it a memorable event. 'Was it well attended?' (*Ayie no bae?*) 'Was it exciting?' (*Ayie no sôe?*) Those are the kind of questions that may be asked as tests of a successful funeral." A few years later Field (1960:48) stressed the same point: "A funeral must always be grand and expensive." But one of the earliest observers sounded an explicitly critical note. When in 1927 J. B. Danquah, one of the first Western-educated Ghanaian scholars, set out to describe Akan funeral customs, he added a footnote to apologize to the reader:

There is no concealing the fact that the account of the custom as here presented would seem repulsive, perhaps objectionable, to the sympathetic student of Akan customs, whereas to the more sophisticated, civilised man, it may seem possible entertaining. Reading this chapter in 1927, I feel strongly inclined to omit it from this book....

Funerals still cause ambivalence. Their extravagance and high costs are frequently criticized in articles and letters in newspapers, in speeches of politicians, and in sermons of pastors. A brief notice in the *Daily Graphic* of June 3, 1994, speaks of "expensive coffins, psychedelic funeral parlors, elaborate banquets and display of extravagant items." Such funerals "are not meant to express grief but rather to show off." A related criticism is that families often spend more money on funerals than they did on care for elderly people. In other words, they take better care of the dead than of the living.² They seem more interested in postmortem than in premortem care. As the proverb goes, *Abusua dò funu* (The family loves the corpse).

This criticism served as a—somewhat provocative—starting point for a number of conversations with elderly people in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town of about five thousand people in the southern part of Ghana. The mainly Kwahu inhabitants of the town belong to the about seven million matrilineal Akan living in the south of the country.³ It was not my first visit to the town. In 1969 I had lived in Kwahu-Tafo to study the local language, Twi, and in 1971 and 1973 I had conducted anthropological research there.

The aim of this new study was to describe and understand the position of elderly people in a rapidly changing society. The research involved interviews—conversations may be a more appropriate term—with some thirty-five elderly people. All conversations were taped and transcribed. Some people were interviewed only once, others twice or more often. Two elders, *Nana Kwaku Agyei* and *Ökyeame* ("linguist") *Kwame Opoku*, were interviewed about ten times and visited very frequently.⁴ Apart from the interviews, I often went to greet the old people informally and had brief conversations with them. These more casual visits enabled me to make obser-

vations about their daily life and the attitudes of other people in the same house. Most of these observations were recorded in a diary, which I kept during the six and a half months of my fieldwork (in 1994, 1995, and 1996).

Through the research, which was almost entirely qualitative, I tried to arrive at a deeper understanding of what it means to be old and become dependent. In this essay I focus on one aspect: How do the old people perceive their funeral, which is drawing closer, and how do their families express their respect for them through the organization of funerals?

Probing elderly people's views of death and funerals led me to question why a society continues to practice what it condemns. Why do lineages compete in staging expensive grand funerals for people whom, they say, they could not properly care for while they were alive? It is this fundamental paradox and question that has directed my interpretation of the Akan funeral as an essentially social event.

My view of the Akan funeral is that it is more social than religious, more *diesseitig* (this-worldly) than *jenseitig* (other-worldly). I will argue that the deceased and his or her dead body, though apparently at the center of the funeral, are primarily symbols, ritual objects that the family needs to perform a ceremony for itself. Surprisingly, interpretation of death celebrations is nearly absent in the anthropological literature on death, dying, and funeral. Both in the classic discussions (Frazer 1913; Malinowski 1916; Radcliffe-Brown 1933; Herz 1960) and in the more recent studies (e.g., Bloch 1971; Rosenblatt et al. 1976; Huntington & Metcalf 1979; Bloch & Parry 1982; Clark 1993), the corpse and the fact of death take center stage. Rituals are ways of managing and overcoming the destruction and danger of death and regenerating life. In this essay, I take the view that funerals are not really about death. Death is only an epiphenomenon, an "excuse," as it were, to celebrate a funeral. Of course, at funerals people cry over their dead and their tears are—in most cases—sincere. But the tears do not explain why the relatives show their munificence over the *dead* body of the elderly person rather than over the living elderly.

The central thesis of this paper is that funerals provide occasions for the living to demonstrate their social, political, and economic excellence. When the deceased's life history does not confirm that excellence, the noise of the funeral will cover up the shameful details. When his or her life is a proof of success, different groups of relatives (matrilineal, bilateral) may fight over the body and claim ownership to use it to their own advantage. When, after a successful funeral, people comment "*Ayie no sòè*" (It was a great funeral) or "*Ayie no bæ*" (The funeral "came"), the triumph is more a credit to the family than to the deceased.

M. Gilbert (1988) has analyzed the death and funeral of an extremely rich businessman in the Akuapem area. In the two sections that follow, I describe the situations of two men from Kwahu-Tafo, one who had a successful life, and another whose life ended miserably.

Teacher Mensah

Mr. Mensah, aged 76, is a retired head teacher of the Presbyterian Middle School at Kwahu-Tafo. He lives in a big house, which he built himself. He had twelve children, ten of whom are still alive. All of them are staying elsewhere, one is living in the United States. His wife has died and he is now married to another woman. They did not have children together. Their relationship is “something like friendship.” She cooks for him, brings him water to bathe, and keeps him company. The house is full of people; some are tenants, but most are relatives—his grandchildren and some children and grandchildren of his present wife.

Mr. Mensah’s health is troubling him. His eyes are very weak, he cannot read anymore, and he often has headaches. But he is also lucky; he can walk and visit his friends. When I ask him if he enjoys his old age he answers, “No, because of ill-health and poor economy.” He has a pension of 37,000 cedis a month (about US\$37) which is not enough to live on. Fortunately, his children support him; they send him money and buy clothes for him. A few minutes later in our conversation he says, “In fact, I am not worried, I feel happy, very very happy. By the grace of God, I am very happy, because I am living in my own house.” That last statement reflects his satisfaction about having built his own house, one of the ingredients of a successful life, but it also refers to the financial support of his children. “My children are really helping me. If it had not been my children, I would have found life very difficult.”

We talk about his house. It still needs to be completed. Part of the house has not yet been roofed and one day he hopes to cement the large center yard. There is no electricity, although having your house wired is not only progress in terms of comfort, but also adds to the owner’s prestige. As one of the local elite, he is very keen to bring *kanea* (light) to his house.⁵

Our conversation turns to funerals. I tell him that I have observed that sometimes people are quite poor and neglected in their old age. The children may be alive, but sometimes they are also poor, so they are unable to offer much assistance to their parents. But then when an old person falls sick and dies, the relatives organize a big funeral and spend a lot of money. I ask him: “Why didn’t they spend the money when the old person was alive? They could have made him better, perhaps, or made the last years of his life more comfortable. What makes people spend so much money *after* the death of a person?” The following conversation (in English) followed:

M: I am not in favor of what we are doing over here now. It is because of pride. The family also wants people to praise them for such luxurious ways. They want people to see that they are wealthy. Whereas in reality they had that poor person in the family and they could not care for him. It is wrong on our part, because we are not showing any true love. If indeed we were showing true love, we would have spent the money on the person.

vdG: Everybody is saying exactly the same thing as you are saying, then why are we still doing it?

M: It is a fashion we are copying blindly, which we should stop.

vdG: Have you told your children not to do the same thing?

M: I have told them, if it is possible they should bury me the same day when I die. I would not like them to spend money on my death but rather to spend the money on the young ones.⁶

vdG: But I am sure you are going to have a very big funeral.

M: Anyway [you may be right], because my children would like all other people to come.

This conversation took place on May 10, 1994. About one year later I received a letter from one of my friends at Kwahu-Tafo saying that Teacher Mensah had suddenly died. His funeral had been the biggest of that year, he wrote. When I returned to Ghana in August 1995, I went first to Mensah's house to pay my respects to the widow and give her my condolences. When I reached the house, I saw it had been freshly painted, the yard had been cemented, the roof had been completed, and they now had electricity.

A few days after my arrival one of my friends gave me an elaborate account of Teacher Mensah's death and funeral. After he had died in Accra, his body was deposited in a mortuary, where it stayed for about a month. In the meantime, the children organized a full face-lift of the house to prepare it for a worthy funeral. All the wishes of the old man were fulfilled in a couple of weeks: the roofing, the cementing, repairs, and electricity. The entire house was repainted and the road leading to it was improved as well. His sons and daughters and some of his brother's children assisted in cash or kind.

The evening before the day of the funeral people from all the churches in town gathered in the house for the wake. The body had been laid in state, nicely dressed. Inside the house a singing band sang gospel songs while outside a "jamboree" (a kind of disk-jockey) played recorded music, mostly Highlife songs. On the day of the funeral the relatives of the deceased provided food and drinks lavishly to the many visitors who had come from far away. They had even slaughtered a cow to feed the guests. At around 10:30 A.M. the coffin was taken to the Presbyterian church for the funeral service. The church was filled to capacity and an even larger crowd stayed outside. From there the coffin was taken to the cemetery where it was placed in a cemented grave.

In 1996 I talked again with some friends about Teacher Mensah's funeral. The discussion turned to the expenses. No one knew exactly how much the celebration had cost. One had heard six million cedis (about US\$6,000),

an enormous amount according to local standards. Another one knew that one of Mensah's children had contributed one or two million cedis.

Boama Twerefo

I met Boama Twerefo in 1971 when I started my first fieldwork in Kwahu-Tafo. Boama was an old and pitiful man, a leper, an alcoholic, and an outcast dressed in rags. He was staying under a kind of side shelter near the market. But Boama was also a singer and a drummer who in his better days had sung for the national radio. At least that was what people told me. Two days after our first meeting he was prepared to sing one of his songs for me. I still have the recording. In the background one can hear the women shouting to their children and pounding fufu for their clients.

The song was difficult to understand. It was full of proverbs and other traditional idioms and had many references to people in his family. During the interview I conducted with him at the conclusion of the song, he explained that the song was about his own miserable life. During the rest of the conversation he did little more than quote a number of proverbs, some of which were also in the song, which dealt with hatred, jealousy, and witchcraft between members of one *abusua* (lineage).

With the help of several people I was able to make a transcription of the song and to translate it into English. My plan to discuss the transcription with him never materialized. Boama avoided me and did not keep any of his promises. I tried to contact his relatives but they were unwilling to talk to me. I remember that I gave him a pair of trousers, two tins of milk, and one tin of sardines. The next day I saw someone else dressed in the trousers and Boama still in his old rags, drunk. The connection was obvious: He had sold my gift to buy alcohol.

Boama was an extreme example of rejection. His sickness and permanent drunkenness had contributed to his fate. His relatives did not want to have anything to do with him. In his song he expressed his feelings of complete desertion in two references to his death and funeral:

I will die
when all my children have left for their farms.

Yon, yon, yon, will there be anyone
at my funeral?

When I returned to Kwahu-Tafo one year later I heard that the old man had died. Immediately I thought of his funeral song and asked people how the funeral had been. They said it had been grand.

Akan Funerals

Among the Akan people in Ghana, the funeral is commonly regarded as the ultimate care that the family provides for its members. "Ultimate" in a double sense: It is not only the last thing the family does for a person, it is also the most elaborate and expensive activity they organize for him or her. A funeral, one could say, is the culmination or climax of care the family extends to a person who may have been disabled, sick, or otherwise dependent for a period of time. Several people with whom I discussed the issue stressed that in the funeral the family shows its deepest love, concern, and respect for the one who has died. A seventy-year-old widow interviewed by Apt (1996:128) expressed this concern as follows: "My only daughter is now providing me with most of my needs. I pray that I die early so that my only child and grandchildren bury me with dignity." Field (1960:48–49), whom I quoted before, emphasizes the religious meaning of the funeral. A funeral should be grand because "the honour done to the deceased on his departure determines the honour with which he will be received in the next world. If he is dissatisfied with this he may visit his displeasure on his heirs by sending them trouble and misfortune. It is considered recklessly bad policy to stint funeral expenses."

But I want to place some critical notions alongside this "classic" view. According to my observations and conversations in Kwahu-Tafo, many old people who received little care and enjoyed just as little company during their last years were given a sumptuous funeral. That contradiction triggered several questions about the family's support for its aging members.

When I compare my observations of 1969–73 in Kwahu-Tafo to those of 1994–96, I am particularly struck by the secularization and commercialization of the funeral. In 1971 there was still fasting (at least formally; behind the scenes there was a lot of cheating), and many women of the *abusua* of the deceased had their heads shaved. The elders played the main role during the rituals; they had their traditional drumming and reigned on the dance floor. The young absconded to the beer bar where Highlife hits were played such as "Maame Adwoa," "Julie," and "Onipa nsè hwee."

Now shaving and fasting are no longer practiced and Highlife music dominates the scene. Formerly, someone said, funerals were more "sorrowful" and serious (though drunkenness and merriment were never absent). But to put it simply, now things clearly are done more to please the attendants than the deceased. Food, which formerly had been prepared for the deceased, is now served for visitors. Many families hire a music band to perform at the funeral (cf. De Witte 2000:83), or a cultural dance group to make the funeral look more traditional (De Witte 2000: 84; Miescher 1997:529). Funerals have become even more professionalized and commercialized as new technology has increased the means to impress others. Highlife music has taken over at the expense of traditional drumming and dancing.⁷ "Jamborees" are hired to play music and make announcements,

mostly about donations, through huge loudspeakers that blast the proceedings all over town. They bring with them all the technical equipment needed—cassette recorders, turntables, a generator—and since they also play at other festivities, such as birthday and wedding parties, they often use the funeral as an opportunity to display their talents and to sell music cassettes. Another recent phenomenon is making a video film of the ceremony that may later be distributed in the family and sent to relatives abroad who were unable to attend. The focus of these films seems to be the number and quality of the visitors who attended, the true measure of a funeral's success (cf. De Witte 2000: 82–83; Miescher 1997:531). The funerals, in other words, are more for the living than for the dead.⁸

The “professionalization” of the funeral means that more and more tasks that used to be carried out by members of the family are now delegated to outsiders, and hiring other people to perform funeral activities has become in itself a matter of prestige. The installation of mortuaries across the country has added another dimension to funerals. The longer a corpse remains in the morgue, the more prestige is attached to the funeral. This is true not only because a longer period allows the family to make more preparations for a successful event; the mere duration of the corpse's stay in the mortuary commands respect. People know the high prices of mortuaries and can estimate the amount of money the family was able to pay. It proves that the family can afford the expenses, and since money is a measure of social prestige, the more money that is spent, the more the family is admired. For the same reason, the *abusua* will rarely admit that it made a profit at a funeral. It carries more prestige to run into debt, thereby confirming just how much money was spent. Finally, the growing number of relatives abroad plays a crucial role in the escalating expenses. They often request that the burial be postponed until they can attend, and they frequently pay for the huge costs. Thus having well-to-do relatives abroad adds more to the success of the funeral than it ever did to the life of the deceased.⁹

In the biweekly *West Africa*, Yeboah-Afari (1997) has listed the main expenses of a present-day lavish funeral: the coffin, mortuary costs, hosting sympathizers, hiring a hearse, funeral advertisements, the buying of funeral cloths and specially printed T-shirts bearing the portrait of the deceased person. That list is far from complete. Expenses that should be added to it are: repairs on the house where the funeral is held; the decoration of the room where the body is laid in state; the hiring of chairs, canopies, musicians with their equipment, and singing bands.¹⁰ De Witte (2000:78) speaks of a “funeral industry.”

Although it is primarily the matrilineage (*abusua*) that harvests the honor of a successful funeral, it should be pointed out that funerals are often the scenes of conflicts between different parties contesting ownership of the deceased, especially if the deceased's biography is an attractive one. Rules of kinship and inheritance are frequently manipulated to serve the

interests of the contestants, in particular between the mother's and the father's groups.¹¹ Church societies with spiritual kinship claims may also enter the scene, as is illustrated in Gilbert's (1988) article on the death of an Akuapem millionaire.

The old rule that a "bad death" should not have a grand funeral is no longer adhered to (though I am not sure it ever was). 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 mmirika nkò n'ayi ase*) seems to represent ideology more than the actual practice. The "stumbling to death"—a phrase that refers literally to accidental death (*òtòfo wu*)—includes various causes of death that are considered shameful, including "deaths caused by accidents or suicides, by certain illnesses (tuberculosis, syphilis, or leprosy), or during childbirth" (Miescher 1997:529). But, Miescher points out, they do not result in "smaller, less elaborate funerals with fewer participants." I have attended several such funerals; the dramatic cause of death seemed, rather, to increase the grandness of the display, with the shame of the death talked about only offstage.¹² It looked rather as though the *abusua* had put in extra effort to drown any doubts about the family member and—by proxy—about the family itself.

Arhin (1994) describes the changes in the Akan funeral very well. The essentials aspects of funeral rites, he says, have remained largely the same, but their scale has increased in terms of expenditure and local politics. Funerals have become opportunities for money-making (and, I might point out for lovemaking and courtship) and for political engineering.¹³ He lists a few macrostructural developments that have contributed to the present situation, including continued monetarization, migration, and improved communication and technology. But he also points out that funerals should not be regarded as economically wasteful. On the contrary, they support certain industries and stimulate services.

It is true that the business of planning and executing the rites consumes in the aggregate a considerable number of man-hours. On the other hand, the increase in the quality and scale of the funeral rites has stimulated the carpentry (coffin and seats), brewing, distilling and paint trades, and has promoted such service industries as those of the mortician (a Ghanaian version of the undertaker), the suppliers of canopies and seats, and music and dance or cultural groups. (318)

The most interesting phenomenon, however, is not the many changes in the performance of rituals but the consistency of the funeral as the top social celebration in the midst of so many radical structural transformations in Akan society. Attempts by Christian churches to tone down the scale of funerals have met with little success.¹⁴ Support for funerals goes hand in hand with criticism of lavish spending, and, as we shall see, even the "victims" of today's funerals, the elderly, seem firmly attached to them.

That paradox becomes particularly poignant when the deceased was neglected during the last years of his or her life. On the other hand, what constitutes neglect, and what is adequate care?

Care of Old People

It is difficult to get a clear picture of the care that elderly people enjoy. Some, who have been successful in life and able to educate their children and ensure their good social positions are usually fortunate enough to have their children taking good care of them. The parents are well-fed and well-clothed and the children fill their house with luxury items such as lanterns, clocks, watches, radios, and decorations. And since the good life attracts relatives, the houses of such people are often filled with children—nieces, nephews, and grandchildren. “Success in becoming an elder depends on use of personal resources to initiate and maintain relationships among family and friends,” writes Stucki (1995:76), who did fieldwork in an Asante community. When I asked one of the elders why some old people are well off while others seem to be neglected and miserable, he replied, “It all depends on how you started life. If you laid a good foundation, you will reap the results, but if you failed to look after the people around you, they won’t spend their money on you when you are old. Such miserable old people are those who failed to work hard in their youth.”

“Successfully old” depends on a successful life and a successful life is first of all measured by what someone has done for his or her children. Reciprocity is the key to understanding the condition of elderly people. Seth Ansah, one of my informants, said, “If you whistle a melodious tune, it echoes in your ears” (*Wobô hwrema pa a, egygue w'ankasa wotrim*). Someone who failed to manage life successfully faces a bitter and lonely old age. Another of Stucki’s informants told her, “You need money to have people come and greet you—they will want drinks. If you do not have anything to offer, they will not come back. If no one in the family comes to you, you will stay in your room and ‘rot.’ You will be worried because when you are sick no one will come and you will die and no one will know” (120).

The quality of life of the less well-to-do elderly is hard to gauge, however. Several of them seem to contradict themselves. One moment they complain that they have no money to feed themselves. Their children may be far away, hardly visit, and do not send them sufficient money for the parents to live comfortably. The next moment they praise their children for the way they look after their parents, since admitting that their children neglect them is shameful. Whether they stress the gloomy side of their condition or the bright side depends very much on the situation in which the interview takes place. If I had an easy relationship with the elderly person and there were no other people listening, they were more inclined to reveal their worries. Otherwise they preferred to keep up their respectable

appearance. Another matter of some importance was that a few of them expected help from me and therefore stressed their financial difficulties. There was a great variety in quality of care, but more than half of the elderly people I visited during my research complained—correctly, I think—about neglect. Although each case is unique, the following can serve as an example of the general suffering of elderly people.

Agya Kwaku Martin

Agya Kwaku Martin (age 78) married five times in his life and has twenty children. All his children are living outside Kwahu-Tafo. He has built a house in which he occupies one room. In the other six rooms there are tenants. The old man, who was one of the first to attend school, was a respected person during his active life but now he is in a miserable position. Two years ago he suffered a stroke from which he never fully recovered. He is almost blind. His last wife suddenly died a year ago, leaving him alone in a house full of "cruel tenants." He complains that his children do not take care of him and do not send him sufficient money to live decently. I have never been able to discuss this topic with any of the children because I have never met them, but several people told me that *Agya* Martin did not help his children when they were young. One of the children went to the university, but he could do so only with his mother's help. Many of the others themselves are living in poverty. The eldest son has asked his mother—*Agya* Martin's first wife, whom he divorced many years ago—to bring his father food and look after him. The care she offers is, understandably, minimal. When she does not bring food he calls one of the children in the house to buy him some. He spends the day lying in bed. The room is dirty and smells bad. The friends who used to visit him no longer come. One of them (Teacher Mensah) has died, another one has a broken his leg.

The most common activities of care that are—or are supposed to be—given to old people include food, providing warm water for them to take their bath, helping them to bathe if necessary, washing and ironing their clothes, helping them to go to the toilet, and doing small chores such as sweeping the floor, cleaning their room, and running errands. One indirect form of care is becoming increasingly important: sending money. More and more young people are staying elsewhere. They can compensate for their absence by sending money to their parents. A type of "care" that is particularly appreciated by the old is company. Often enough, however, the most attention they get is the final, rather ambiguous, care offered to them at a lavish funeral.

Those most likely to take care of an elderly person are his or her children. Other members of the *abusua* will offer some support if the elderly person helped that family member in the past. Women are far more likely to take on a caring role than men are, although men do offer company and

money. A spouse may become a caregiver, but it is very common for a spouse to disappear when the other one becomes dependent. The person who assumes major responsibility for the daily care of a dependent elderly is often someone who happens to be around or lives in the same house as the elderly person. That person may turn out to be a rather distant relative. The three most crucial principles on the basis of which care is given, or refused, or given only sparsely, are respect for elderly people in general and this elder in particular, social pressure and prestige, and, increasingly, reciprocity. Elderly people who have worked hard for others, particularly their children, can be relatively certain of receiving good care from them in return (cf. van der Geest 1997b; Stucki 1995:99): "The degree of support that children will provide for their father also reflects the amount of trouble and money he spent on their upbringing," Stucki notes. It stands to reason that the same applies to mothers and other relatives. "The ability to maintain strong ties to one's children is... important to both women and men in order to insure that one is given a proper burial" (1995:99).

Conversations

Nothing conveys the ambivalent and complex attitudes toward funerals more vividly than the literal transcriptions of my conversations with the elderly. I present some of these here, not just as illustrations of my argument, but because they are the ethnographic sources of my insights into the social meaning of Akan funerals. I want to emphasize that they were conversations rather than "interviews." They were certainly not "interrogations." If some of the questions appear suggestive, they do so because they are part of a natural conversation in which people oppose or share their views and may—or may not—reach a consensus. One elder I approached on the issue of pre- and postmortem care was *Òpanyin Pusuo*, a blind man who used to be a mason.¹⁵ I asked him:

vdG: Nana, why do you think people like performing expensive funerals?

P: People who perform expensive funerals are rich and have got the money to spend, that is why they do so.

vdG: But why do they do that? Let's say someone is a rich trader in Accra and his relative dies. He comes down and performs a very expensive funeral. Don't you think he may have a special reason for doing so?

P: As I told you, it is because he is rich. He has the money to spend.

vdG: Why did he not spend the money on something other than the funeral?

P: Yes, the main reason is that he wants to enhance his image in public or create a name for himself (*Öpè sè ògye din*), that he was able to give a fitting burial to his relative.

vdG: What may happen if he does not perform such an expensive funeral?

P: If you have money and you don't perform an expensive funeral for your relative, your money is useless. After all, why do people regard you as a rich man? (*Sè wowò sika na sè wantumi anyé kèséè a na wo sika no ho amma mfasoò. Adèn nti na yèfrè wo osikani?*) So if you are rich you should perform a fitting funeral to a departed relative so that wherever the soul may be, it will be content and say: Oh, after my death this relative gave me a fitting funeral.

I discussed the same topic with *Öpanyin* Opoku, the chief's *ökyeame* (linguist). He criticized the practice of expensive funerals:

O: If you look at it carefully, such things are useless. My father used to say that you should treat the sickness of a sick relative to justify your sorrow when he dies. If you neglected someone during his life, why do you hold an expensive funeral after his death?

vdG: Why do you think some people do that?

O: People who do it mostly are the wealthy in Accra and other places. They do it for a name. They want people to praise them and it also is a means for them to get money. At such funerals, the people who perform them invite a lot of their friends and they donate handsome amounts of money to them.

vdG: Is it a disgrace if a person does not perform a big funeral for his departed relative or father?

O: Yes, it is to the wealthy, but to a common person it does not matter much.

vdG: Don't you think people find it a greater disgrace not to perform a big funeral for the dead than to fail in caring for an old person?

O: Yes if you look at it closely, it is exactly so.

vdG: What is your personal opinion about that?

O: To me, it is the position of the deceased during his life that should determine the size of his funeral. If he was hard-working and left some property, there is nothing wrong if a big funeral is held for him, but if he did not leave anything behind but debts, there is no need to hold an expensive funeral.

The above discussion took place in 1995. A year later I visited *Opanyin* Opoku again and brought up the same issue.

vdG: There are two categories of care; one is during one's life, the other is after death. Which of the two, in your opinion, is more important?

O: Good care during one's life is most important. After one's death it is not very important to care so much because it does not benefit the dead person. If a person dies and people refuse to bury or give the person a proper funeral, it does not have any effect on the dead person. But when the person is alive, he feels the effect of neglect. So it is better to care for an old or sick person than to spend a lot of money on his funeral.

vdG: There is a proverb that says a dead person does not care if his buttocks are exposed. (*Nea wawu nnim kata wo to.*) Is it relevant to what you have just explained?

O: Yes, when a person dies, he does not know anymore what is happening, so he does not care about what you do to him. It is rather the people who are alive who can be disgraced by their actions, but not the dead person.

vdG: It means that if no proper funeral is held for a person, it is the relatives and children who are disgraced, not the dead person?

O: Yes it is a disgrace to the children and relatives alive but not to the dead person. When such a thing happens, you hear people commenting and blaming the relatives and children for not giving the dead person a fitting funeral. But if a person takes good care of his children he will get a fitting burial. Even the friends of his children will all help with the funeral. If the deceased has also offered assistance to some relatives they too will contribute to make the funeral a success.

vdG: What is the meaning of the proverb *abusua dò efunu* (the *abusua* loves the corpse)?

O: There are some relatives, nephews and nieces, I have not seen for years. They don't pay any visits to me now but the moment I die you will hear them crying: "Oh! my uncle is dead." They will start to make all sorts of arrangements to come home for my funeral. It shows that they love my dead body (*efunu*) more than my living body. There are some instances when a group of people arrange to buy the same type of cloth to wear during someone's funeral. All this proves that people love *efunu* more than the living person. That is why we give that proverb. When a person is alive, people don't mind him. The person may go hungry but as soon as he dies, people start making elaborate arrangements for his funeral.

The notion that "the family loves the corpse" reflects a long-standing self-criticism in Akan culture. It means that funerals run the risk of being misused for making money and for self-glorification by the *abusua* and overstep their original purpose of paying respect to the deceased and putting him to rest. So do funerals designed to cover up the shame of the family's negligence of the deceased when he or she was still alive. The old men sharply criticized this trend. At the same time, they defend the practice of organizing fitting funerals to render respect to the dead person and bring people together. Failing to provide the deceased with a proper funeral brings shame on the family rather than on the deceased. In the final analysis, it is the honor of the *abusua* that is at stake in the funeral celebration.

I brought up the issue again during a conversation with *Opanyin* Kwabena Dadeè, one of the most successful and respected elders of the town. He replied:

D: To me, it is not necessary to spend much on funerals. What is important is to feed and clothe a person when he is alive. What is the use if you spend money on a dead person, if he was hungry during his lifetime? We don't have to do that at all.

vdG: In case you had your own will, would you like your children not to waste money on your funeral?

D: Yes.

vdG: Now your son is with us. Can you let him understand that you do not want them to spend too much money on your funeral?

D: Yes, if only the children would obey me. I would not like them

to spend money on my funeral. What pains me is that they may not listen to me.

vdG: Most people express the same views as you on funerals but still people do spend a lot of money when someone dies. Why?

D: Most children think that people may insult them if they do not spend a lot of money when their father or mother dies. That makes them spend so much at funerals. To me, no matter how well I looked after my children, I won't be sad if they don't spend a lot of money on my funeral. *Nanso wòn rentie* (But they may not listen to me).

Dadeè could afford the magnanimity to say he did not want a big funeral. He was sure he was going to have one. The subtle prediction that his children would certainly prepare a grand funeral for him in spite of his protest added to his glory. In his case, he was going to enjoy high quality postmortem care after a period of enviable care during his elderly years.

I asked several people why social pressure on rendering proper family care works quite efficiently where the organization of funerals is concerned, while it is often defective in the case of providing material and moral support to elderly members. It always gave rise to a lively discussion, but very few answered the question. Most of the people I spoke to sensed my critical view of the practice and hurried to condemn it. My interpretation is that they saw the responsibility of looking after elderly people as a house affair that is not seen by many. Funerals, however, are public celebrations and participation—by attendance and financial contribution—is visible to the entire community. As one teacher, a respected person, said: "I have always been saying that, when my mother dies, I will not like to do anything like that [i.e. organizing a huge funeral], but people say I should not talk like that. They say that because of their opinion of me. I wouldn't like it, but it is the pressure of the society. That's the main problem we are facing now. I would like to do things in a simple way, but people expect me to do things in such a way that I will be saddled with a lot of debt."

In 1980, M. O. Mensah, a well-to-do citizen from the Kwahu town of Pepease and managing proprietor of a company in Accra, took an interesting initiative to prevent people from organizing a grand funeral after his death. In a "humble request to all relatives and friends" he told them among other things:

All relatives and friends of mine who would pay donations when I die, should please, pay such donations either by cash or in kind to me personally against receipt or to my bankers.... All such payments should be made now or at least during my lifetime; that is, before I die.... All expenses to be incurred during my funeral have already been taken care of in my will. Therefore, no member of my family, wives or children should spend a pesewa towards my burial.

I love flowers. Therefore, anyone who intends to send wreaths or flowers to my grave should start sending them to me right now while I am living....

On the eve of my burial, a short and quiet wake without my body should be kept from 6 P.M. to 10 P.M. prompt. My dead body or carcass should not, repeat, NOT be laid in state. Only my picture may be displayed....

My coffin should not be opened for more than one hour.... Already my face is not too pleasant to look at even when I am alive, so when I die it will certainly look worse. Only 30 minutes should be used for the church service....

The next day... my family, wives and children should complete all funeral rites, including expenses and read my last will and testament. There should be no one week, one month, 40th day or one year's celebration. This is just time and money wasting. My funeral should NOT be COMMERCIALISED. I also hate funeral parties.

No family member, wife or child should put on black clothes for more than a fortnight.... I consider this to be a mere show off. Anybody from the family, friend or wife who wants to show his or her love or affection should do so while I am living.

The statement was signed by his father and the *abusua panyin* (lineage head) saying, "We have no objection." I will be very surprised if the wishes of Mr. Mensah, who is still alive, are indeed carried out after his death. They clash too much with the interests of the family. K. A. Appiah (1992:294–313) describes the situation in which his father, the politician Joe Appiah, was buried. He and the other children were unable to honor their father's convictions or request: "The exhibition of dead bodies to all and sundry prior to burial and subsequent unnecessary and elaborate funeral celebrations have always distressed me; therefore I solemnly request these abominable trappings be avoided at my passing away." But Joe Appiah's body was appropriated to serve the family's politics of reputation.

The subject of funerals came up during a conversation between me and four elderly men in the nearby town of Abetifi.¹⁶ One of them said, "If there is someone who does not look after his father and mother, people abuse him and will say: 'Look how his father lived and now that he is dead, look what he is doing. He has gone to Auntie Animaa to hire a bed, but the father may never have slept on a bed in his whole life.'" (Auntie Animaa owns a drinking bar and is at the same time a funeral undertaker from whom one can buy coffins and hire beds, decorations for the funeral parlor, sound systems, and so on.) I asked these men what would happen if someone who did not look after his father very well organized a big funeral for him. Two of them replied, "We abuse him, we abuse him very much." But when I asked them for a concrete example from their town, they could not present one. Instead, one of them related the following story of what he considered a "disgraceful funeral":

Sometimes it happens that mourners don't go to eat the food, which has been prepared. I remember the case of a very rich man. Whenever someone was bereaved, he would offer about one pound sterling (in those days a lot of money): "Take this and some palm wine." When his mother died he prepared plenty of food, meat and the rest. The chief ordered that whoever had received a donation from the man should refund it to him [the chief]. He collected all the money and asked the linguist to send it back... and tell [the rich man] that they were not waiting for his donations. They expected, rather, that he would come and drink with them at the funeral ground. Because he never drank with them at the funeral, they too would not drink his wine. They did not need his money.

I asked this man what happened at the rich man's funeral. He answered: "*Èyèe basaa*" (It was a failure). Undoubtedly, the story reveals the speaker's most pressing concern about funerals. Failing to attend the funerals of others will result in the failure of one's own. He gave an example of another unsuccessful funeral that people had boycotted out of anger with the deceased: "Why should we go? [they thought]. You [were] rich, but when my mother died, you did not come. You did not bring meat. Now that you are dead, I should come and enjoy your meat? Some of the meat got rotten. We did not go. It was no funeral (*N'ayiye no koraa amma*)."

The most pertinent conclusion to be drawn from the discussion is that the four elders were more concerned about the disgrace of a poorly attended funeral than about the shame of neglect or lack of care for an elderly person. When I asked *Òpanynin Kwaku Agyei* what a funeral represented, his answer was brief and clear: *Anuonyam* (honor). Closely related to this concept of honor is the reciprocal nature of funeral attendance. If A attends a funeral in B's family, B should be present when there is a funeral in A's house. If A neglected funerals in other people's families, these people will disgrace A by boycotting a funeral he has arranged. Attending a funeral is less a tribute to the deceased than an obligation to the living members of the *abusua*.

Agya Kwaku Martin

Above, I described briefly the miserable and lonely situation of *Agya Kwaku Martin*, the old man with twenty children. A few months after my last visit, in January 1997, he died. A friend sent me a copy of the printed program of his burial, memorial, and thanksgiving service. It contained two pictures of the deceased dressed in kente cloth in his youthful days, the program of the various ceremonies, a biography, a page with tributes by his children, and the texts of twelve hymns that were sung during the service in the Presbyterian church.¹⁷ The friend also gave a description of the funeral as he had experienced it: "When death lay its icy hands on the man, the normal atmosphere of peace and quietude gave way to uncontrollable loud

tears, especially among the female household. People began to throng the house to have a glimpse of the deceased and share their sorrows with the bereaved family."

For three weeks, a massive face-lift was carried out in *Agya Martin*'s house: repair work and painting that far exceeded the needs of the owner himself in his last days, and an exercise he never lived to see from his children or family. The living room was completely redecorated by the time he was laid in state. The shining brass metal bed was mounted under a snow-white canopy surrounded by blue ribbons, and beautiful artificial flowers hung in the corners of the parlor. It all gave *Agya Martin*, dressed in a splendid cloth, a majestic look. As a crowning touch, neon lights flashed every now and then inside and around the edges of the canopy. A decorative mirror with an inscription "Rest In Peace" was hung at the head of the canopy. All around the bed were mourners who filed past the body to pay their last respects. In the main compound was a teeming mass of people, some of them dancing to music that blared from the huge loudspeakers of the jamboree.

On the whole about 2 million cedis (then about US\$2,000) was spent on the funeral. Public donation yielded 1,700,000 cedis. The deficit was borne by *Agya Kwaku Martin*'s children, thus to dignify their father.

Conclusion

Criticism of the present funeral practices may be growing, but it is unlikely that it will have much effect. Funerals are first of all occasions when families compete for social prestige. No family can afford to stay behind. The person and life of the deceased are of secondary importance.

The statements of my informants about "disgraceful funerals" forced me to think more critically about the concept of disgrace. Without a public context, disgrace is meaningless. Clearly, a funeral generates greater commitment and expenditure than premortem care because the former is public and the latter is private. Neglect of the elderly is viewed as wrong, but it carries fewer connotations of disgrace because it can remain unobserved by others. While often complaining about poverty and loneliness, the elderly themselves did not like to be too openly critical of their children because that would publicize the latter's failings and impose disgrace upon the parent; perhaps, for example, they had failed to give their children a proper education. Public honor is of greater importance than private welfare.

A good funeral not only confers prestige upon the family in the sense that it demonstrates that the members of the family are successful in life and are respected and admired by others; it also makes a public display of solidarity within the family. As one old man noted, "A funeral brings people together for the society to realize that we love one another."

Most of the elders expressed criticism about the neglect of the living

elderly as compared to the extravagance bestowed on the dead ones. Several of them even pleaded for a brief and simple ceremony after their death. But that request was perfunctory. It added to their honor that they talked disparagingly about a big funeral for themselves. However, between the lines I sensed a great concern for a successful and grand funeral. When Teacher Mensah remarked that he did not want his children to spend money on his death, he was only pretending. He admitted this a moment later when I replied that I was sure he was going to have a very big funeral. "My children would like all other people to come," he said. After the death, the person's wishes do not matter anyway. The body becomes a *corpus festi*, a ritual object, an indispensable "party good" for a proper celebration.¹⁸ "We deceive the dead with kente cloth" (*Yède kente daadaa efunu*) according to one proverb. We dress the dead body nicely to contribute to the success of the funeral, but we secretly take back the kente cloth before we bury the body.

My exploration of the meaning of funerals for old people in an Akan rural community has been an attempt to go beyond first appearances, which suggest that funerals are designed to give honor and "safe passage" to the deceased. In Akan life, show matters more than unseen qualities. At closer look, funerals prove to be, first of all, family exercises in self-congratulation. In spite of all that has been said about the "private disgrace" of neglecting elderly people, the public disgrace of a poorly organized funeral worries the elderly more. In their eyes, a proper and successful funeral celebration is the most crucial service that the *abusua* can and should render to them. The contrast between a sumptuous ritual and a meager life does not, in reality, bother the elderly much. The importance attached to conspicuous consumption and display of loyalty at the funeral may in some way compensate for losses and neglect in other spheres of life. Both young and old are too deeply involved in the game of honor and shame to criticize the comparatively poor care that some of the elderly received before death.

Looking at funerals from the point of view of the elderly, I am ambivalent in my conclusions. The elderly view their approaching funeral as both gratifying and wasteful. In this essay I have argued that the principal gratification does not lie in the glorification of the deceased, contrary to what the words and rituals suggest, but in the self-glorification of the organizers, the *abusua*, and other related groups. Not the religious but the social importance of the funeral explains its buoyancy in the face of political and religious opposition.

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Notes

1. The research for this article was carried out with the help of many people. Most prominent was the assistance given by my Ghanaian co-researchers Kwame Fosu, Samuel Sarkodie, Patrick Atuobi, Anthony Obeng Boamah, and Michael Buabeng. Benjamin Boadu typed most of the research material. I am further

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2. A recent report by a Ghanaian author on "the seemingly inexhaustible Ghanaian obsession with grand funerals" starts with exactly the same point: "A person may have lived in deprivation all his life; he or she may even have died a premature death because he had no money to go to hospital. But no sooner than he kicks the bucket... than family members start rushing around to give their dearly beloved a 'fitting' funeral, so that he can go into the next world in style" (Yeboah-Afari 1997: 610).

Criticism of the high expenses and other "excesses" of funerals has a long tradition in Ghana and has both an economic and a Christian background. See for example Nimako (1954), Garlick (1971:102–6), Pobee (1973), Bame (1977). In a letter to the editor of the *Daily Graphic* of January 17, 1980 someone writes: "It is high time we stopped paying too much attention to the dead. We must rather think of how to improve the standard of living of Ghanaians." Arhin (1994) argues, however, that funerals are economically useful. Manuh (1995) remarks that it would be futile to try to curb funeral costs.

3. Other Akan groups include the Asante, Fante, Akyem, Akuapem, Bono, and many other smaller groups. Some of the important anthropological studies of Akan culture are those by Rattray (1923, 1927, 1929), Busia (1951), Field (1960), Fortes (1969), Arhin (1979), and Oppong (1981). Studies dealing with Kwahu society include Bleek (1975, 1976), Bartle (1977) and Miescher (1997).
4. *Nana* (lit. "grandparent") is an honorific term for an elderly person, male or female. Another respectful term for addressing an elderly man is *Agya* (father). An elderly woman may be addressed as *Maame* (Mother).

Okyeame (often translated as "linguist") is an official at the chief's court. Yankah (1995:3) describes the function of the *okyeame* as "speaking for the chief": "Being a counselor 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 *okyeame*'s editorial art, the royal speech act is considered functionally and artistically incomplete."

5. For an elaborate discussion on the meaning of building a house in the Akan culture, see van der Geest 1998b.
6. Similar statements were made by elderly people interviewed by Miescher (1997:541–42) in the town of Abetifi. "Don't use money on my dead body," one of them exclaimed.
7. For a discussion of Highlife songs which are played at funerals, see van der Geest (1980, 1984) and Yankah (1984).

8. One of my Ghanaian readers protested. This was putting it too simply. The family, he wrote, shows respect for the dead and for itself: "The dead person is mourned, the funeral is properly organized, and the family does not do anything which brings its name into disrepute. If these conditions are taken care of, the dead is honored."
9. In 1995, when someone died in a hospital, the first week in the mortuary was usually free. The second week 5000 cedis per day were charged, the third week 10,000 cedis, etc. To reduce the costs relatives sometimes moved the body from one mortuary to another so that they only had to pay second week rates. It also happened that relatives tried to get a sick person admitted to the hospital before his or her death in order to benefit from the free first week. In the pre-mortuary era the opposite happened: A dying patient was taken away from the hospital and brought home to avoid the high costs of transporting a dead body.

A recent addition to the elaboration of funerals is the manufacture of an eccentric—and expensive—coffin which represents an aspect of the life of the deceased, e.g. a coffin in the form of a canoe for a fisherman, an onion for a farmer, a car for a taxi driver (Secretan 1995). My personal impression, however, is that these coffins are made more for Western museums and art collectors than for deceased Ghanaians.

10. Due to the new trend of contracting out every task, the Akan funeral threatens to lose what some regard its most "wholesome" quality: the active involvement of close relatives in the ritual, which is believed to benefit the mourning process. For a description of a grand funeral in Kwahu see Miescher (1997:527–46). For more extensive discussion of the meaning of money in the life of elderly people, see Stucki 1995 and van der Geest 1997a.
11. In the case of Teacher Mensah's funeral, for example, his children took a more prominent role in organizing and financing the ceremony than his *abusua*.
12. De Witte (2000:70–71) provides a vivid description of a dramatic funeral (*soroku*) for a young man who died at the age of 28: "Both women and men were crying vehemently. Some guys threw firecrackers into the public. Causing panic. Others were rolling on the floor, pouring water over themselves or making noise by screaming, hitting bells, or tooting horns.... A few men wore plain red women's dresses. Others had their hair and face covered with a big black scarf, red stocking, or a red party wig. [His] sister wore a chain of condoms around her neck while waving with more. One boy was holding a plastic container as if it was a video camera and 'recorded' the scene. Many people were drunk.... On the way to the cemetery, young men were pushing and pulling the coffin.... When we arrived at the cemetery, a boy was standing in the grave and refused to come out. Three men were needed to pull him out before the coffin could be put in." In 1971 I recorded similar scenes at the funeral of a fifty-year-old woman who left seven children behind (Bleek 1975:57–69).
13. In a note, Arhin (1994:320) adds the well-known anecdote of "the man whose friend told him he looked gloomy. His maternal uncle was critically ill in hospital, said the man. The friend retorted: 'But in that case you have won the lotto,' meaning probable windfalls from donations."
14. A Catholic priest pointed out to me that ironically the church itself is the most fervent celebrator of funerals. When a priest dies, his funeral is an example of the extravagance that the church wants to quell among its faithful. On the

other hand, Presbyterian and Methodist churches have gained some success in abolishing the custom of laying the body in state the day before the funeral and holding a wake.

15. *Opayin* (elder) is a complex term. In a strict sense it refers to an elderly man who has been successful in life and enjoys people's respect but the term is also used more loosely for any elderly man. The concept of *opayin* is extensively discussed in van der Geest (1998a).
16. That discussion is quoted more extensively in van der Geest (1995).
17. Kente is expensive hand-woven cloth worn at festive occasions.
18. *Corpus festi* in analogy with *corpus delicti*. But the corpse can become a *corpus delicti* as well. In 1971 an *abusua panyin* (family head) refused to organize a funeral for a female member of the family because she had offended him during her life. That refusal caused enormous commotion in the town and led to emotional debates. Only after painful apologies and heavy fines paid by her husband was the body of the deceased woman brought to her *abusua* house to be laid in state and buried. The extended case of this funeral formed the starting point for a study of a Kwahu family (Bleek 1975). The case demonstrates—in a negative way—the point stressed in this essay: Dead bodies are used by the living for their own affairs.