



Afterlife in 1 Thessalonians 4:14 and its Implications for Akan Christians in the Practice of Farewell to the Dead

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ABSTRACT

The adherents of many religions in the world – such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion (ATR) – believe that though the death of a person marks the end of his/her physical existence on earth, the dead continue to live in another world which is not visible to the living. Much as both Christianity and ATR believe in life after death, the content of their teachings on the afterlife and the rites they perform to bid farewell to the dead vary from one another. It appears that most African Christians are still attached to traditional African norms and practices such as extravagant funeral rites which turn out to be a yoke on their shoulders. The purpose of this study is to help Christians understand that the hope in the resurrection of the dead and the need to pray for the dead must hold a prominent place in bidding farewell to the deceased. Thus the study evaluated and compared some Christian beliefs and practices vis à vis African traditional norms and values. The method of comparative analysis was applied, and the case study involved the Akan people of Ghana. The paper concluded that while African Christians should cherish African values and culture, they must also acknowledge their new Christian identity and adhere strictly to measures put in place to avoid flamboyant funeral observance. The paper contributes to the debate on how to reconcile Christian values and practices with African traditional customs and practices.

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INTRODUCTION

It is an indisputable fact that Christianity was a foreign religion which found its feet on African soil mostly through European missionaries. Consequently, Christian norms, values, practices, etc. which the Africans who embraced Christianity had to adapt and practice were more in tune with the European culture and worldview than those of the Africans.¹ Prior to the arrival of Christianity, however,

¹ Augustine Peprah, “The Inculturation of the Asante Culture into Catholicism, Peter Kwasi Sarpong’s Perspective,” *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 5, no. 3 (March 27, 2024): 352–63, 352. <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.20245316>; Emmanuel Kojo Ennin Antwi, “Assessing the Mode of Biblical Interpretation in the Light of African Biblical Hermeneutics: The Case of the Mother-Tongue Biblical Interpretation in Ghana,” *Religions* 15, no. 2 (February 8, 2024): 1–13, 1-2. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020203>.

Africans were known to be “notoriously religious.”² They were basically adherents of their own African Traditional Religion(s) and more accustomed to the African worldview, culture, traditional values, etc. Thus, “Africans tend to have an inherently religious or spiritual worldview that is not lost when they become Christians.”³ Most African Christians found themselves in a dilemma since their choice of being Christians appeared to bring with it a conflict of allegiance in regard to whether they should adhere strictly to the Christian norms and practices or also pay heed to the demands of the African culture, traditional values and practices. Elizabeth Mburu, for one, rightly observes that African Christians live “dichotomized lives,” and she explains that African Christians appear not to comprehend how their faith should reflect in their everyday lives and practices, hence though they are Christians yet when they are confronted with issues not related to the church, they react and respond to them like the world would do: a proof that they are not able to live strictly according to their faith and to the Christian teaching.⁴

One area where most African Christians find it difficult to deal with is the practice of bidding farewell to the dead. The belief in the afterlife is adhered to in both Christianity and ATR, but both religions do not have the same teachings (or worldview) concerning the afterlife and the practice of bidding farewell to the deceased. It so happens that most African Christians seem to become attached to the traditional African rites rather than going strictly by the Christian way of bidding farewell to the dead. This paper takes the Akan people of Ghana as a case study to compare and evaluate the traditional African belief in the afterlife and the traditional way of bidding farewell to the dead vis à vis the Christian belief and practice in relation to that same phenomenon.

Funeral observance in most parts of Ghana has been characterized these days by hefty spending. However, much as the stream of this unfortunate phenomenon of ostentatious funerals flows and meanders through most cultures and societies in Ghana (and in Africa as a whole), the way and manner one tribe or ethnic group goes about its funeral observance may differ slightly or vastly from the other. While the customs and practices of some ethnic groups in Ghana call for expensive funerals, others (especially some ethnic groups in the Northern Regions of Ghana) do not necessarily promote and provide any motivation for such extravagant funerals. Van Gennep correctly asserts that “funeral rites vary widely among different peoples and that further variations depend on the sex, age, and social position of the deceased.”⁵ He also emphasizes that: “Funeral rites are further complicated when within a single people there are several contradictory or different conceptions of the afterworld which may become intermingled with one another so that their confusion is reflected in the rites.”⁶ The Akan people of Ghana in recent times have been known to be one of the ethnic groups in Ghana whose funeral observance has been characterized by not only the showcase of rich cultural values and traditional practices but also hefty spending. The Akan people of Ghana have been chosen, therefore, as a case study in this paper to serve as a lens through which the perplexing problem of the organisation and observance of ostentatious funerals among Ghanaian Christians can be identified and addressed appropriately.

By the method of comparative analysis, the paper does not only aim at identifying the causes of flamboyant funerals among the Akan people of Ghana but also seeks to lay bare the Christian teaching on the afterlife and how the Christian teaching could help reform the extravagance associated with funerals in some parts of Ghana – especially in the Akan communities.

The Akan People of Ghana

Though Ghanaians consider themselves as a people of a common national identity, Ghana – like any other African country – is characterized by many societies, tribes or ethnic groups, traditions and

² John Mbiti is credited for correctly describing Africans as “notoriously religious.” John S. Mbiti, *African Concept of God* (London: SMC Press, 1970), 1.

³ Elizabeth Mburu, *African Hermeneutics* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Publishing, 2019), 7.

⁴ Mburu, *African Hermeneutics*, 3.

⁵ Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 146.

⁶ Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 146.

people of different mother tongues or languages (or dialects) and distinct cultural heritage. One of the predominant groups of people of a common cultural identity in Ghana is the Akan people. The Akan people occupy about nine out of the sixteen regions in Ghana. The nine regions they occupy are: Ashanti, Ahafo, Bono, Bono East, Central, Eastern, Western, Western North, and Volta. Thus, Akan is the largest ethnic group in Ghana, and it is made up of various sub-ethnic groups or tribes which include the Asante, Bono, Ahafo, Fante, Agona, Akyem, Akuapem, Akwamu, Denkyira, Kwawu, Wassa, Assin-Twifu, Nzima-Evalue, Ahanta and Sefwi.⁷ Though the Akan people are located primarily in the central and southern parts of present-day Ghana, there is also a sizeable Akan population found in Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast).⁸ The various tribes or ethnic groups forming the Akan people have similar traditions and cultural heritage. For example, the language of the Akan people of Ghana is collectively identified as Akan. However, the Akan people of Ghana have many dialects – e.g., Asante Twi, Fante, Akuapem, Bono, Sefwi, etc. – most of which share vocabulary but with different accents, and they are mutually intelligible.⁹ Each of the various tribes forming the Akan has its own paramount chief (and sub-chiefs) and traditional council or administration. For example, the paramount chief of the Asante (*Asantehene*) has the title *Otumfoɔ* (the all-powerful), and the seat of the *Asantehene* is at Kumasi, the capital city of the Asante Kingdom.

The Akan believe in a supreme being or deity known as *Onyame* or *Onyankoropɔn* (“God”) who is the creator of the cosmos and everything that exists. They also believe in spirits and *Abosom* (“lesser gods”) who serve as intermediaries between humans and *Onyame* (“God”). A hallmark of the Akan people is the sense of communality whereby each and everyone is required to be conscious of the fact that he or she should be there for the other. Thus, the Akan have a worldview characterized by a holistic understanding of the interconnectedness of all things. They have reverence for nature, the physical and the spiritual world, and a strong sense of communal life and responsibility. They also uphold their cultural heritage and traditional values.

Death and the Concept of the Afterlife Among the Akan

Prior to any discussion on the phenomenon of death and the Akan belief in life after death, there is the need to delve into Akan anthropology in order to understand the Akan conception of a person and the origin of human beings. The Akan believe that human beings are created by the almighty God (*Onyankoropɔn*) who, in fact, created everything that exists in the universe. While some Akan anthropologists hold the view that the human person is made up of three main elements which are the body (*honam*), the spirit (*sunsum*) and the soul (*okra*), others opine that the human person is composed of four main elements: the body (*honam*), the spirit (*sunsum*), the soul (*okra*), and the breath (*honhom*). The breath (*honhom*) and the spirit (*sunsum*) are sometimes used interchangeably just as the spirit (*sunsum*) and the soul (*okra*). Other Akan anthropologists go as far as adding the blood (*mogya*) to the four main elements already mentioned. What stands out among the anthropologists, however, is that all of them share the opinion that the human person consists of the corporal or the material or the physical elements on one hand and the spiritual or immaterial or the non-physical components. While the body (*honam*) and the blood (*mogya*) are considered the physical elements, the spirit (*sunsum*), the soul (*okra*), and the breath (*honhom*) form the spiritual components of a human being. For the Akan, death means the departure of the breath (the spiritual component) from the body (the material element). Sarpong clearly explains the components of the human person when he writes:

⁷ Collins B. Agyemang, Maxwell A. Asumeng, and Benjamin Amponsah, “The Relevance of Ghanaian Akan Proverbs to Explanations of Contemporary Human Resource Principles and Corporate Values,” *Journal of Business Research* 9, no. 1 (2015): 16–27, 17; Peter Sarpong, *Girls Nubility Rites in Ashanti* (Ulm: Süddeutsche Verlagsgesellschaft, 1991), 1; Michael Kwadwo Ntiamoah, “Religious and Social Relevance of Nsuae (Oath Swearing) in Akan Indigenous Leadership Formation,” *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 1, no. 2 (2015): 122–39, 124; Emmanuel Kojo Ennin Antwi, Isaac Forson Adjei, and Joseph Kwadwo Asuming, “Understanding Wisdom in the Old Testament through Its Akan (Ghana) Parallels: Linkages and Disconnections,” *Old Testament Essays* 33, no. 3 (2020): 408–27, 414.

⁸ Sarpong, *Girls Nubility Rites in Ashanti*, 1.

⁹ Antwi, Adjei, and Asuming, “Understanding Wisdom in the Old Testament through Its Akan (Ghana) Parallels: Linkages and Disconnections,” 414.

The soul is said to be a small particle of God and it is this which makes a person a human being. The breath of life accompanies the soul and enables the person to breathe, making him a living human being. When the breath of life leaves the person, he stops breathing, and he is dead. Then the soul leaving him, returns to God, the spirit turning into a ghost [*saman*] or an ancestor and setting out for the world of ancestors [*asamando*]. The person's body is buried in the ground.”¹⁰

Sarpong echoes this same thought in another book of his where he writes:

Okra originates from God and is the humanizing principle, the principle that makes me a human being and distinct from the brute animal, the tree, the river, the rope, etc. all of which have their *bogya* [blood] and their *sunsum* [spirit]. The *okra* [soul] is also the principle of luck which makes me happy or sad *Honhom* [breath] is the Breath of Life, coming from God, without which we would be dead. It is the principle of life in the human being. When the *honhom* leaves me, I am dead. The *okra* goes back to God to be judged; the *sunsum* becomes *saman* (Ghost) and the *bogya* is buried in the ground.¹¹

The Akan's definition of death as the departure of the breath (*honhom*) from the body (*honam*) appears to be traceable to the biblical account of creation and the human condition in the first chapters of the book of Genesis in the Old Testament (OT). It is read in Genesis 2:7 that when God formed the first human being Adam from the dust or soil ('*āpār*) of the earth ('*ādāmāh*), God breathed into Adam's nostrils for Adam to become a living being. Thus, the breath (*něšāmāh*) of God gave life to the first human being and God's breath was an expression of life. It is not surprising, therefore, to learn also from the New Testament (NT) that the departure of one's breath or soul (from the body) is an expression of death. In Luke 12:20, for example, one learns that to a fabulously rich person who was planning to save his possessions for future use, God said this: "Fool, this very night your soul will be demanded of you (or will be taken back)" The fact that his soul would be taken back or away meant he was going to die. The English word *soul* or *life* in Luke 12:20 translates the biblical Greek word *psychē*, and this *psychē* corresponds to the biblical Hebrew word *něšāmāh* or *nāpāš* which literally means "breath," and that is the breath of life which God breathed into Adam's nostrils for Adam to become a living being (Genesis 2:7). Thus, once God decides to take back the soul or the breath of life from a person, the person dies. It is even stated categorically in 1 Samuel 2:6 that it is the Lord who puts to death, and it is the Lord who gives life; the Lord takes away life and he makes alive. That is the biblical understanding of physical (or natural) death.

A similar belief is also held in Greek mythology. In Greek mythology – as it can be found in the discourse between Socrates and his conversation partners in Plato's work *Phaedo* – death is described either as the parting away of the soul from the body (by God) or the separation and deliverance of the soul from the body (*Phaedo* 64c – 67d); and after the death of the human person, it is only the soul that makes a journey to the 'underworld' where the soul would then be reborn (cf. *Phaedo* 70a-d).¹² Such definitions of death can be differentiated from clinical or medical meaning of the term death which is sometimes said to be the permanent cessation or stoppage of the brain and the biological or vital functions of the human person.

One may be tempted to believe that the Akan conception of the human person, death and the afterlife might have been borrowed from the creation account in the Bible or even from Greek mythology. It is possible that such similar concepts might have resulted from cultural borrowing and transformation whereby some cultural elements like concepts and terms such as these are transferred from one culture to another and are adapted or assimilated into the target culture. The question then arises: Which culture borrowed from the other? In fact, the different approaches to the explanation of

¹⁰ Peter Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974), 37; Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Accra-Ghana: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996), 13-14; Eric Owusu, *The Fate of the Dead and the Living at the Lord's Parousia: Exegesis of 1 Thessalonians 1: 9-10; 4: 13-18; 5: 1-11* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021), 15-16.

¹¹ Peter Sarpong, *Peoples Differ: An Approach to Inculturation in Evangelisation* (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2002), 93. Kwame Gyekye also stresses that "... the soul is some spark of God in the human person – making it of divine origin – and that the soul returns to God when the person dies. Thus, the soul of the human person is held to be immortal." Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*, 13.

¹² Owusu, *The Fate of the Dead and the Living at the Lord's Parousia: Exegesis of 1 Thessalonians 1: 9-10; 4: 13-18; 5: 1-11, 22-23*.

these concepts among the different cultures and groups of people are so compelling to depict the fact that each and every culture or group of people has its own unique way of defining the content of their belief systems. The phenomenon and the meaning of death as well as the belief in life after death try to establish another related belief in many cultures: immortality.

The Concept of Immortality Among the Akan of Ghana

Immortality can be defined as the condition in which the human person continues to live indefinitely, even after the physical death of the person. Thus, the belief in immortality generally purports that, human persons by virtue of being living beings, continue to exist or live forever and eternally.

James Denny tries to trace the meaning of immortality in the earlier stages of religious history as he writes:

The faith in immortality, as is well known, has existed in very various forms. In its primitive forms, it is almost purely negative. It has its origin not in the ambition of man, nor in his sense of his own value, but rather in the impotence of his mind. He believes in the continuance of his being after death because he is incapable of forming such an abstract conception as that of his extinction The Sheol of the Old Testament and the House of Hades in the Odyssey [in Greek mythology] both belong to this stage. In both, there is a world beyond death in which existence is continued, but men [or persons] do not believe in it or hope for it under the impulse of motives which have any meaning or any value for us. They believe in it only because they are unable to realise the alternative of annihilation.¹³

In his claim, Denny appears to emphasize the origin and meaning of the concept called immortality from both philosophical and religious viewpoints, and he tries to make it clear that the belief in immortality is not based on any meaningful value but rather is a (better) choice from alternatives, i.e., human beings would not accept that they forever cease to exist after their death, and so they rather prefer to be assured that they continue to live forever, even after their death.

The belief in immortality among the Akan can equally be understood from both philosophical and religious perspectives. Just like the philosophies of many African cultures, Akan philosophy can be found in Akan proverbs, folklore, songs, dirges, inscriptions on sculptures, wood carvings, potteries and other artefacts, and in traditional artistic symbols such as the famous *Adinkra* symbols. Semiology, i.e., the study of signs and symbols, has long been a powerful form of communication in human societies. In Ghana, “the Adinkra symbols hold a special place as a means of conveying deeper philosophical and symbolic meanings.”¹⁴ For example, there is an *Adinkra* symbol which depicts an Akan philosophy about the immortality of the human person. This symbol represents the maxim *Nyame nwu na mawu* (“God will not die for me to die”) or *Nyame bewu ansa na mawu* (“God will die before I die”). In his explanation of this symbol, Kwame Gyekye stresses that it is not the human person per se that survives death but the human soul. He asserts that this Akan artistic symbol assumes the immortality of God, and it means that “since God will not die, a person, that is, his or her soul, conceived as an in-dwelling spark of God, will not die either. In other words, the eternity of God implies the immortality of the human soul which is a part of the divine essence.”¹⁵ For Gyekye, “the reality of the world of the spirits [*asamando*], inhabited by those who have departed this life, is based upon the assumptions about the immortality of the human soul and personal survival in an afterlife.”¹⁶

The belief that the human soul is the element that is able to survive bodily death and live forever or eternally is also held in ancient Greek mythology and in other religions such as Christianity and Islam. For example, in ancient Greek mythology an absolute distinction is drawn between the soul and the body – while the soul is considered immortal and only a part of the human being, the body is seen

¹³ James Denny, “Factors of Faith in Immortality,” in *The Expositor, Eighth Series, Volume 1*, ed. Robertson W. Nicoll (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1911), 2; Owusu, *The Fate of the Dead and the Living at the Lord’s Parousia: Exegesis of 1 Thessalonians 1: 9-10; 4: 13-18; 5: 1-11*, 13.

¹⁴ Kwame Adinkra, “Symbolic Communication of Otumfuo’s Cloth during Outdooring of NAPO as Running Mate to Dr. Bawumia in Kumasi,” GhanaWeb, July 12, 2024, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Symbolic-communication-of-Otumfuo-s-cloth-during-outdooring-of-NAPO-as-running-mate-to-Dr-Bawumia-in-Kumasi-1939843>.

¹⁵ Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*, 13-14.

¹⁶ Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*, 14.

as mortal and perishable. For the ancient Greeks, therefore, it is only the soul which makes a journey to Hades or the netherworld after death.¹⁷ In Judaism, however, much as the belief in the immortality of the soul is held, much emphasis is also placed on the fact that it is the whole person – i.e., body and soul – that survives death and enters into Sheôl, the place of the dead. Jacob’s pronouncements in Genesis 37:35; 42:38; 44:29 attest to this belief of the Jews. In Genesis 37:35 (in the Masoretic Text), for instance, Jacob does not say: “**My soul** will go down in mourning to Sheôl to my son” but he says: “**I** will go down in mourning to Sheôl to my son.”¹⁸ This in turn means that when God is calling a person back from Sheôl, the person comes back from this place of the dead body and soul. 1 Samuel 2:6 is so emphatic that the almighty God brings people down to Sheôl and raises them up again body and soul. This Jewish belief in the OT sets the foundation for the belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ in the NT which has eventually become the hermeneutical key for the understanding of the story of Jesus and the Scripture (see Luke 24:45-46; I Thess 4:14; Acts 17:3; 26:23).

Though the Akan of Ghana place emphasis on the immortality of the soul, they seem to share partly in the Jewish view expressed in the OT that it is the entire person or being that makes a journey to the abode of the dead after physical death. This is because the Akan hold the belief that the dead person maintains his/her social status in the netherworld (*Asamando*), i.e., a king on earth continues to be a king in the otherworld and a servant continues to serve in the netherworld. This belief also manifests in the way the Akan bid farewell to the deceased.

The Practice of Bidding Farewell to the Dead among the Akan

The Akan believe that death can happen to a person through natural causes such as old age and normal sickness. Nonetheless, they also believe that a person can die through unnatural causes and some agents which include witchcraft, curse, lightning, *juju* or magical power, poison, accident, drowning, enemy’s weapon during war, etc.¹⁹ Sarpong rightly observes that though death is inescapable, death is never welcome among the Akan. He explains that “the moment that death wickedly severs the ties between the living and their relative is a very dramatically sorrowful one, which occasions rites and rituals.”²⁰ Funeral rites are performed to bid farewell to the dead.

Among the Akan too, funeral rites are considered generally as a part of the rites of passage. By way of explaining rites of passage, Sarpong writes:

All over Africa, and, in fact, all over the world, significant rituals and ceremonies are, with varying degrees of intensity and seriousness, performed at the three major turning points of a man’s life. In the so-called primitive societies, these rites are collectively termed *Rites de Passage* (*Rites of Passage* from one stage to another).²¹

Sarpong identifies the three crucial turning points of a person’s life as: 1) the time a person enters the world through *birth*; 2) when he comes of age and enters the world of *adults*; and 3) when, through *death*, he departs from this world and enters the world of his forebears.²² Thus, for Sarpong *birth*, *adulthood* and *death* are remarkable stages in every person’s life and they form the rites of passage. At a point in time in one’s life, one passes or moves from one crucial stage of life to another. In the words of Awolalu and Dohanu, death is the final turning point in the life of man here on earth: No matter how long a person lives, death must come as a necessary end.²³

Van Gennep classifies the rites of passage under three subdivisions which are 1) *rites of separation*; 2) *transition rites*; and 3) *rites of incorporation*. He explains further that:

¹⁷ Cf. Plato’s *Phaedo* 64c-67d, 70a-d, 80a-e, 105e, 106e, 107a-e; Homer’s *Odyssey* 11.130-151, 210-224. See also Owusu, *The Fate of the Dead and the Living at the Lord’s Parousia: Exegesis of 1 Thessalonians 1: 9-10; 4: 13-18; 5: 1-11*, 14.

¹⁸ Owusu, *The Fate of the Dead and the Living at the Lord’s Parousia: Exegesis of 1 Thessalonians 1: 9-10; 4: 13-18; 5: 1-11*, 25.

¹⁹ Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, 72.

²⁰ Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, 72.

²¹ Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, 71.

²² Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, 71.

²³ Joseph Omosade Awolalu and Peter Adelumo Dohanu, *West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Onibonjo Press and Book Industries, 1979), 253.

Rites of separation are prominent in funeral ceremonies, and rites of incorporation at marriages [i.e., in adulthood]. Transition rites may play an important part, for instance, in pregnancy, betrothal, and initiation; or they may be reduced to a minimum in adoption, in the delivery of a second child²⁴

For van Gennep, some funeral rites can also be considered rites of incorporation because they “incorporate the deceased into the world of the dead.”²⁵

The literature reviewed so far on rites of passage reveals that death is a rite of passage which marks the stage in life where a person departs from the land of the living and enters the other world, the world of the dead. After the death of a person, some rites and rituals are performed to bid farewell to the deceased. Much as these rites and rituals may take similar forms in different cultures, they also differ most times from one society or culture to the other. Sarpong describes, by way of summary, how the Akan go about bidding farewell to the dead as follows:

After death, the corpse is treated in a manner befitting the sex, age, and status of the deceased. Burial follows death and funerals follow burials. Anniversaries of deaths too are important, and are often ritually observed with due attention. The type of burial and funeral rites accorded a deceased person are commensurate with his sex, age, status, manner of death, reputation in life, and the resources of his living relatives.²⁶

Van Gennep echoes this same reality concerning burial and funeral rites as he writes: “Everyone knows that funeral rites vary widely among different peoples and that further variations depend on the sex, age, and social position of the deceased.”²⁷

Apart from the sex, age, reputation in life, status, etc. of the deceased, the manner of death is also a prominent factor that determines the kind of burial or funeral rites accorded to the deceased. Many cultures in West Africa have two main categories of death: bad death and good death, and burials and funeral ceremonies are observed in a manner due to the specific type of death. Bad deaths include the death of a child; the death of lunatics; suicide; death caused by an accident (e.g., falling from a palm tree); death by a curse through the gods or persons; death brought about by evil forces such as witchcraft or sorcery; death by a strange disease such as leprosy; death of women during pregnancy or in childbirth; death through murder, burning or drowning.²⁸ Awolalu and Dopanu clarify that:

Bad deaths do not normally receive full funeral rites. When a child dies, the parents and relatives lament the death and dispose of the corpse as quickly as possible since it is a bad death Furthermore, the burial of a person who dies a bad death is not attended by common people but by specialists who are knowledgeable in essential rituals It is also believed that people who die bad death cannot join their ancestors and they cannot re-incarnate. People do not even give them much thought, and they are not discussed beyond the point of the necessity to dispose of them as hurriedly as possible. That is why such deceased do not enjoy the attention given to the ancestors – they are not remembered and they do not have ancestral shrines.²⁹

Among the Akan of Ghana, one reason for not mourning a bad death like suicide (i.e., the taking of one’s own life or the killing of oneself) is to serve as a deterrent to committing suicide.

Good death, on the other hand, is the death which comes when a person lives to a ripe old age. In other words, death which comes as a result of old age is good or natural death. The person may pass away after a brief illness.³⁰ Awolalu and Dopanu explain further that: “Although death itself is always regarded as uncanny and disturbing, the death of an aged person is an occasion of much rejoicing, and the ritual elaboration is heaviest at their funeral since people see nothing tragic about it.”³¹ Recent developments, however, prove that though a person may die a bad death such as an untimely death at

²⁴ Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 10-11.

²⁵ Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 146.

²⁶ Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, 72.

²⁷ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 146.

²⁸ Awolalu and Dopanu, *West African Traditional Religion*, 72.

²⁹ Awolalu and Dopanu, *West African Traditional Religion*, 254.

³⁰ Awolalu and Dopanu, *West African Traditional Religion*, 254, 255.

³¹ Awolalu and Dopanu, *West African Traditional Religion*, 254.

a young age, he or she may still be accorded a befitting burial and funeral rites. Awolalu and Dopanu lay this fact bare when they stress that:

Also, there are occasions when the death of a young man or woman is not considered totally bad. Such a person must have lived an exemplary and good life and must have left behind some children. People believe that he or she will have a good place in the abode of the spirits. And although they mourn the death, they still give it a befitting burial.³²

Thus, in bidding farewell to the dead among the Akan of Ghana and among many cultures in West Africa, one notices that, “it is those who die a good death that are given impressive burial ceremonies. That is why people everywhere strive to die a good death which alone will entitle them to a formal burial, and they avoid a bad death which will not only deprive them of full burial rites but also deny them a good place in the world of the spirits.”³³

Awolalu and Dopanu give some reasons and purposes for burial and funeral rites in most West African societies as follows:

That death is not the final end and does not write *finis* to the life of man, that death is only a transition from the physical world to the spirit world, and that the deceased is only making a journey from this earth to another place, is seen in the funeral arrangements and burial. The corpse is thoroughly washed, and it is laid in state in very good costly cloths in preparation for the journey. It is believed that the deceased is being made ready and fit for the next world.³⁴

The purpose and the reasons given above with regard to burial and funeral rites in most West African societies and cultures fit very well also in the belief system of the Akan. Awolalu and Dopanu rightly observe that:

An Akan man at death is believed to have gone to the world of the spirits by climbing the hill of death. His last gasps are indicative of his efforts to climb this hill. And in order to help him in his climbing, a little water is poured down his throat by a child usually kept near an old man or dying man. When the man finally dies, people consider that he has successfully climbed the hill of death, and is now properly set on his way to join the company of the ancestors. To make the way easy for him, rum is poured down the throat of the corpse, and a libation of rum is poured for his spirit.³⁵

The rites and rituals performed in the act of bidding farewell to the dead are geared towards the belief that there is life after death: bodily death only marks the end of a person’s life here on earth, but it is not the total annihilation of the person’s entire life and existence. After death, the soul or the spirit of the dead makes a journey to the world of the spirits to continue to live among the ancestors. While some groups of the Akan people of Ghana believe in a journey by climbing hills or mountains, others emphasise a journey by crossing a river. Awolalu and Dopanu explain further some preparations made for the deceased in the following words:

Other things done for the journey to the world beyond include the washing of the body, the dressing of the body in the finest clothes available, the doing of the hair, and the tying of money to the wrists of the deceased. All these will help the deceased to cross the river of death. The body is then laid in state. It is now that public mourning begins. People wail and sob, and sing funeral dirges. Relatives put money on the coffin and they offer prayers to the deceased for health, children, long life and general well-being.³⁶

The rituals for the burial gradually come to an end when the corpse is finally laid down in the grave at the cemetery. The most remarkable ceremony that follows the burial is the funeral rite, and after that comes also the first anniversary.

³² Awolalu and Dopanu, *West African Traditional Religion*, 255.

³³ Awolalu and Dopanu, *West African Traditional Religion*, 256.

³⁴ Awolalu and Dopanu, *West African Traditional Religion*, 256.

³⁵ Awolalu and Dopanu, *West African Traditional Religion*, 268.

³⁶ Awolalu and Dopanu, *West African Traditional Religion*, 268.

Funeral Ceremonies among the Akan in Contemporary Times

As already noted above, one of the reasons for the dead person's failure to enter into the final abode of the dead (i.e., *asamando*) is when he or she is not given a befitting burial. This might explain why many bereaved families in the past and until today tried, by hook or by crook, to organize befitting burials for their "royals" or deceased family members and loved ones. Again, a proper burial and funeral observance for the dead not only gives honour and prestige to the deceased but also to the bereaved family and all other sympathisers who involve themselves in such ceremonies. The observance of proper burials and funeral ceremonies among the Akan also goes a long way to depict some aspects of their culture. Dirges are sung (sometimes with the help of local instruments like *atentenben*) to express the deep sorrows and hopelessness associated with the loss of a loved one. The wearing of traditional clothes such as *kuntunkuni*, *kobene*, *kente*, etc., and indigenous sandals like *kyawkyaw* at funerals also tells a lot about the sad or precarious situation the bereaved family and the community at large find themselves due to the death of "one of their own."

The traditional dances such as *adowa*, *kete*, etc. danced to the melodious tunes of folk music sung by the local chorus known as *Nnwonkorɔ kuo* not only create a spectacular scene at funeral ceremonies to watch with ecstasy but also give hope to the bereaved families, console them and help them forget about their sorrows – at least, for the time being. Family members, loved ones and all those who attend the funeral are served food and drinks; they eat together to express their communality and unity. Eating together also reminds them that despite everything, life goes on. Friends, community members and loved ones give money or cash donations – also called *nsawa* (a kind of widow's mite) – as well as assorted drinks, food, water, etc., to the bereaved families or the mourners to help them defray the cost of the funeral ceremonies. The donations made at funerals are a sign of showing solidarity with the mourners to let them feel that they are not left alone in their loss or sorrows. After the funeral ceremony, the bereaved family sends some members of the family and also friends (mostly women) to go around and thank all those who came to the funeral and/or donated in cash or in kind. The activities involved in the observance of the funeral rites among the Akan – most of which are not mentioned here³⁷ – show that it takes much time, much preparation, a lot of resources, and a whole family and community to organize and observe funeral ceremonies.

An objective assessment of the funeral rites observed by the Akan reveals that funeral ceremonies provide avenues to showcase the Akan tradition and cultural heritage. At funeral observances, the rich culture and traditions of the Akan are portrayed, admired, and adored. Moreover, the funeral rite – being the last of the rites of passage in a person's life – creates the opportunity to honour, show the last respect, and say a final farewell to the dead person who is believed to be about to begin a journey to the other world. The Akan believe that the dead person will not be happy on his/her way to the world of the spirits (*asamando*) after realizing that he/she was not revered and granted a respectable burial and funeral observance or final farewell.³⁸ When the living organise and observe appropriate burial and funeral ceremonies for the dead, the living perform the duty of granting the dead what is their due. Indeed, among the Akan,

One of the signs of a successful life and a good death is the way a deceased person's funeral is celebrated. Funerals are regarded as a duty, and no pains may be spared to make them memorable. The kind of questions that are asked after a funeral are 'How was the attendance?' 'Was it exciting?' Funerals must be successful and the answers to those questions are a pointer to their success or failure.³⁹

Reciprocally, the bereaved family, relatives and friends of the dead person also bask in the respect and great honour granted the deceased through the organisation and the observance of a fitting or prestigious burial and funeral ceremony for the dead person. In fact,

³⁷ For more details on how funeral rites are performed among the Akan people of Ghana, see Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, 29-32.

³⁸ Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, 21-22.

³⁹ Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, 26.

The Ghanaian lays much store on the way in which his funeral or the funeral of his relative is observed. A 'bad' funeral is a disgrace as much to the dead person as it is to his living relatives. A 'good' funeral on the other hand is prestigious. Everybody speaks about it long after it has been observed.⁴⁰

The above observations on the observance of burial and funeral rites among the Akan attest to the fact that Ghanaians and Africans in general have a lot of good things to showcase to the world through their traditions and cultural heritage.

Nonetheless, there are clear and manifest cases and instances where things appear to get out of hand and depart markedly from the pure tradition and cultural heritage bequeathed to the Akan people so far as the observance of funeral and burial rites among the Akan in the contemporary era is concerned. Unlike in the past when burial and funeral ceremonies among the Akan took a simple routine, such ceremonies today take different forms and, in most cases, they involve excessive costs and much fanfare. No wonder that after the death of a person, the ceremonies involved in the final rite of passage may be postponed and performed at a chosen time when the bereaved family has the means of observing them.⁴¹

Many factors come into play to serve as the reasons why a lot of ostentatious funerals are organised among the Akan and even in most parts of Ghana today. These include the following:

(i). The Akan Understanding of Death, the Hereafter, and Funerals: It has been said above that the Akan believe that when a person dies, he/she makes a journey to the world of the ancestors, and he/she continues to live in the other world in the same social status he/she enjoyed while on earth, so that a royal or a king continues to live in the ancestral world as a royal or a king, and a farmer continues to live there as a farmer, etc. Moreover, the dead person must be given a befitting burial which commensurate with his/her social or economic status while living on earth. It is, indeed, a laudable practice. However, in the name of giving a befitting burial to the dead, bereaved families go to the extent of organizing extravagant burial and funeral rites for the dead. The way and manner funerals are observed today among the Akan has taken a new turn so much so that what is considered a befitting funeral rite has been identified with hefty expenses, lavishness and showcasing of wealth and social status. Nowadays, in most parts of Ghana when a person dies, he or she is laid in state in a manner which befits his or her profession, vocation, job, or status in society. For example, a musician or a comedian may be laid in state with a caricature microphone in the hand facing the mouth, and the coffin of a cocoa farmer may be designed like the cocoa fruit, etc. All these innovations in recent times might have stemmed from the Akan belief that the dead person continues to live in the otherworld in the same status or social position he or she held during his or her lifetime on earth. Such recent practices and innovations in funeral observance, however, involve a lot of money sometimes.

(ii). Societal Pressure and Values: It appears that during funerals, society observes and judges how the funeral was organized and observed, and how much was invested in the funeral. Sarpong notes correctly that:

Not infrequently one hears comments on refreshments, how individuals behaved, and on some other activities of the celebrations, such as the way in which materials were put on display by the in-laws of the deceased, the way the dancing went, how much money was collected in donation, etc.⁴²

In most cases, such observations and comments passed by community members and other mourners who witness the funeral put pleasure on bereaved families to put in more money and resources in the organization and observance of funerals. Such funerals supposedly give evidence that the deceased was a wealthy person from a wealthy and respectable family, and families that can afford such ostentatious funerals are accorded much respect and a good name in the community. Thus, the honour, respect, and prestige attached to ostentatious funerals today in some parts of Ghana (especially

⁴⁰ Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, 29.

⁴¹ Awolalu and Dopanu, *West African Traditional Religion*, 270.

⁴² Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, 26-27.

among the Akan) have become a motivation for bereaved families or mourners to opt for flamboyant funeral observance anyway, even if they cannot afford such a funeral but must borrow money to meet the huge expenses involved. It also creates unnecessary competition because once families want to be spoken well of and win respect and praise from society, they leave no stone unturned to make sure that their funerals meet the standard and approval of society. With this competitive consciousness, some bereaved families also spend a lot of money and resources to bring more innovations that can make their funerals stand out and be considered the best funeral ever in the community.

(iii). Commercialisation of Funerals for Economic Gains: Another factor is the economic gains from funerals. Most bereaved families and sympathisers today take advantage of funeral observances to make a profit. This development has resulted in the so-called “commercialization of funerals.” For example, individuals and companies render funeral services, and sometimes their charges are high depending on the kind of service they render during the observance of funerals. In the abstract of their article, Victor Gedzi, et al. revealed that:

Funeral celebrations over the years amongst the Asante in Ghana have generated the development of funeral enterprises as permanent or additional sources of livelihood in many communities in Kumasi and its environs. These enterprises have now become stable economic ventures for the owners as well as their employees that contribute to the quality development of many in the society.⁴³

Marleen de Witte in one of her articles examines “the current commercialisation and expansion of Asante funeral celebrations in Ghana,” and in the abstract of the article she asserts correctly that:

... in Asante, the money economy and the social significance of the funeral tradition do not contravene but rather reinforce each other. The funeral celebration is not wiped away by monetisation, nor is it a kind of last defence against it. Indeed, it is exactly through money and commodification that funeral celebrations are expanding, social ties forged, and cultural performances stimulated, albeit in new ways. In Asante funerals, people appropriate practices of consumption and commercial enterprise as well as indigenous traditions and exchange patterns in a process of ‘cultural bricolage’, and develop new, local styles of celebrating death, in which money has come to play a central role as a social glue and as an expression of lifestyles, cultural values and ideals.⁴⁴

As part of the commercialization of funerals, large billboards displaying the photographs of the deceased with the funeral announcements are placed at vantage points especially in cities and in big towns and they most times serve the purpose of advertising the funeral. Again, during the one-week funeral rite, the burial, and the final funeral observance, some families hire and pay for the services of experts in mourning or “professional wailers” who come to mourn, wail and sing dirges. The purpose of this practice is to show the public that the deceased was loved by all – the vacuum his/her death has created cannot be filled. However, another side of the coin is that the dirges sung by the experts are supposed to arouse sympathy in the people who attend the funeral to contribute more money as their “widow’s mite” (*nsawa*) towards the funeral.

iv. Modern Trends and Innovations in Funeral Observance: In the past, when a person passed away, the family members of the deceased met together a week after the demise of their beloved family member and scheduled the date for the burial and the final funeral observance. The period between the one-week rite and the day of the burial and the final funeral rite was a time for the family and loved ones to prepare for the final event. It did not take much money, time and resources to organize the one-week family get-together.

However, in current times, the one week after the demise of a person has become a big function and celebration in many Akan communities. Food and drinks are served to the attendees; Disk Jockeys (DJs), brass-band music or other musical groups such as *nwomkoro* and *kete* are hired to play music at

⁴³ Victor Selorme Gedzi, George M Bob-Milliar, and Seth Tweneboah, “Death Rituals as a Livelihood Strategy among the Asante in Ghana,” *Journal of Indigenous and Shamanic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2020): 43–51.

⁴⁴ Marleen de Witte, “Money and Death: Funeral Business in Asante, Ghana,” *Africa* 73, no. 4 (November 3, 2003): 531–59, <https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2003.73.4.531>.

the one-week observance; and some bereaved families recommend a special funeral cloth to be bought, sewn and worn by family members and other sympathisers for the one-week observance. All these involve much money, time and resources. It is not surprising, therefore, that sometimes in order to get enough money and resources to observe the one-week, some bereaved families postpone it and observe it weeks or months after the death of the person. Most times, huge sums of money are also required for the preparations for the final funeral ceremony which follows the one-week observance: a lot of money may be spent to renovate the family house to make it presentable for the guests who attend the funeral; the bereaved family may again decide on the buying of special funeral cloth, i.e., one for the final funeral observance and another for the thanksgiving service in the church – while the thanksgiving cloth is normally white in colour, the other cloth may be black or red.

Other practices which inflate the cost of funerals these days include the following:

- i. Long stay of the corpse at the mortuary and expensive coffin for the burial: Sometimes the corpse is kept for so long in the morgue that the mortuary fee goes higher. There are so many reasons for this practice. It could be that the bereaved family needs a long time to be able to prepare fully for the funeral. It could also be that some prominent members of the family are staying abroad and need to take part in the ceremony and so those at home wait for them. There might also be litigation among family members so the corpse may stay in the morgue so long as the case is not settled. Added to the high mortuary fee may be the high cost of the coffin for the burial since some bereaved families prefer to buy a very expensive coffin to bury the dead.
- ii. The Akan people of Ghana also have a practice whereby they arrange many valuable things (*adekyeredee*) in a convoy and display them, i.e., women carry such valuables like clothes, jewellery (*agudee*), etc., and they come one after the other to display the valuable things to the public during the final funeral observance. Such practice tries to prove that the dead person comes from a worthy and noble family. In fact, the Asante of Ghana (or the Akan generally) are known to be a people who like boasting of their family background, status and wealth. It so happens that sometimes the bereaved family does not buy such valuables, but they hire them to be showcased at the funeral grounds. However, even with the hiring, the family must pay some amount of money.
- iii. The serving of food and drinks at the final funeral ceremony: Bereaved families make sure that they provide food and drinks (i.e., water, alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, etc.) for the guests and all other people who come from far and near to mourn and sympathise with them. This practice appears to take a big chunk of the funeral budget or expenses.
- iv. Decorations: During the “laying-in-state,” people are allowed to see the dead body and pay their last respects. Most often, the room containing the corpse is fabulously decorated with flowers and lights, and the floor is covered with special costly carpets in shades of green, red, or any other colours. Enlarged pictures of the deceased are placed in the family house and other vantage points on the funeral grounds. The funeral ground is sometimes covered with green carpets and the cost of this depends on how large the funeral ground is. Some bereaved families also keep on changing the clothing on the corpse during the laying-in-state. The brochure printed for the funeral sometimes appears very sophisticated designed with many pictures, long biographies and tributes, etc. All this adds extra cost to the funeral expenses.

There are occasions when the deceased happens to be a worthy person with much influence in the family and in the community at large, and so after his or her demise in his or her old age the bereaved family and the community may not think of the cost involved in the funeral but on how best to honour such a person. Most of such funerals are characterised by much razzle-dazzle, extravaganza, pageantry, spectacle, etc. such that the environment created is not that of mourning for the dead but celebrating the dead. Awolalu and Dopanu are correct in their observation that: “Although death itself is always regarded as uncanny and disturbing, the death of an aged person is an occasion of much rejoicing, and the ritual elaboration is heaviest at their funeral since people see nothing tragic about

it.”⁴⁵ There may be no question that the high costs of such spectacular funerals are within the resources and means of the bereaved families, but they set standards in the community which other bereaved families would like to follow, and so it becomes a tragic moment for poor families when they become aware that they cannot observe such funerals. To meet societal standards, poor families must borrow money or go for loans to meet the high expenses of the funeral. Many financial institutions and credit unions are ready to grant loans for funeral costs, but sometimes with exorbitant interest rates.

The time is long overdue for people to see the need to cut down funeral costs in our communities to save poor families from the headache of searching for money to organize funerals worthy of admiration by the public and society. The Christian understanding of death and the afterlife taught in the Bible can help Christians especially to see the need to organize simple and moderate befitting burials for the deceased. Saint Paul’s teaching in 1 Thessalonians 4.14 and in other related texts could be of great help in this enterprise.

Translation and Exegesis of 1 Thessalonians 4:14

The Greek version of 1 Thess 4:14 in Nestle-Aland reads as follows:

εἰ γὰρ πιστεύομεν ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἀπέθανεν καὶ ἀνέστη, οὕτως καὶ ὁ θεὸς τοὺς κοιμηθέντας διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἄξει σὺν αὐτοῖς.

This Greek version can be translated as follows:

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose [from the dead], so too will God bring with him through Jesus those who have fallen asleep.

Due to the peculiar arrangement of the individual words and phrases in the Greek version of 1 Thess 4:14, one needs to be extra careful in the translation of the text so as to retain its actual meaning. As it stands, the Greek text (as well as its English translation) presents a conditional sentence which can be divided into two parts: 4:14a which reads: *For if we believe that Jesus died and rose [from the dead]* (*εἰ γὰρ πιστεύομεν ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἀπέθανεν καὶ ἀνέστη*) and 4:14b which reads: *so too will God bring with him through Jesus those who have fallen asleep* (*οὕτως καὶ ὁ θεὸς τοὺς κοιμηθέντας διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἄξει σὺν αὐτοῖς*).

With the expression “For if” (*εἰ γὰρ*) which begins 4:14a Paul introduces the first part or the *protasis* of the conditional sentence, and he then uses “so too” or “so also” (*οὕτως καὶ*) in 4:14b to begin the second part or the *apodosis* of the conditional sentence. With the second part or the *apodosis* he introduces the inference drawn from the preceding statement or the *protasis*. In the first part (4:14a), Paul introduces a direct discourse based on a credal formula and with this credal formula, he reminds his audience and readers of the fact that “Christ died, he was buried, and he rose from the dead on the third day after his death and burial” (confer also 1 Corinthians 15:3-5). The first part, therefore, highlights Christ’s death and resurrection. In the second part (4:14b), the inference Paul draws from the credal formula in the premise is that just as Christ died, was buried and rose from the dead, so also will God bring with him those who have died and are asleep through Jesus Christ. The Greek nominative plural noun *οἱ κοιμηθέντες* meaning “those who have fallen asleep” is a euphemism and so it is a substitution for “the dead.”

Again, in the second part (4:14b) one realizes that God and Jesus are mentioned but there is only one main verb *ἄξει* (“he will bring” or “he will lead”). The question then arises: Who is the subject of the verb? In fact, the subject of the main verb *ἄξει* (future active indicative 3rd person singular of the infinitive *ἄγειν*: “to lead,” “to bring,” etc.) should be seen as God (*θεὸς*). In this way, God clearly becomes the main agent who brings the dead back to himself as the creator but at the same time Jesus becomes the instrument of the act of bringing together, i.e., it is rather through Jesus (*διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ*) that God brings the dead with him or to himself (*σὺν αὐτοῖς*).⁴⁶ A translation of 1 Thess 4:14 reads: “We believe that Jesus died and rose again; so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have

⁴⁵ Awolalu and Dohanu, *West African Traditional Religion*, 254.

⁴⁶ Owusu, *The Fate of the Dead and the Living at the Lord’s Parousia: Exegesis of 1 Thessalonians 1: 9-10; 4: 13-18; 5: 1-11*, 125-126.

died believing in him.”⁴⁷ Such a translation actually brings out the nuance of the text and it emphasises that God is the subject of the act of bringing together the dead with Jesus to himself.

Paul’s simple logic in the conditional sentence found in 1 Thessalonians 4:14 is that since Christ died and was raised from the dead, so will the believers in Christ be raised from the dead after their death. Thus, Christ’s death and resurrection provide the basis for Christians’ hope of life after death. This motive permeates also other Pauline letters: 1 Corinthians 6:14; 2 Corinthians 4:14; Romans 8:11. These three related texts from the Pauline Corpus can be presented and examined side by side in the following table:

Text	Greek Text from the Nestle-Aland	Author’s translation with emphasis	Summary
1 Cor 6:14	ὁ δὲ θεὸς καὶ τὸν κύριον ἤγειρεν καὶ ἡμᾶς ἐξεγερεῖ διὰ τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ.	“And if God raised the Lord [Jesus from the dead], he will also raise us up [from the dead] through his power.”	God raised Jesus from the dead and through God’s own power he will raise us also from the dead.
2 Cor 4:14	εἰδότες ὅτι ὁ ἐγείρας τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν καὶ ἡμᾶς σὺν Ἰησοῦ ἐγερεῖ καὶ παραστήσει σὺν ὑμῖν.	“We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus [from the dead] will also raise us [from the dead] with Jesus and place us with you [beside himself].”	Paul and the early believers know that the same God who raised Jesus from the dead will raise all other believers in Christ from the dead and with Jesus they will be in God’s presence.
Rom 8:11	εἰ δὲ τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ ἐγείραντος τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐκ νεκρῶν οἰκεῖ ἐν ὑμῖν, ὁ ἐγείρας Χριστὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν ζωοποιήσει καὶ τὰ θνητὰ σώματα ὑμῶν διὰ τοῦ ἐνοικοῦντος αὐτοῦ πνεύματος ἐν ὑμῖν.	“And if the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit dwelling in you.”	So long as the Spirit of God – who raised Jesus from the dead – dwells in us, God will give life to our mortal bodies through the same life-giving Spirit dwelling in us.

In addition to 1 Thess 4:14, the three texts (1 Cor 6:14; 2 Cor 4:14; Rom 8:11) are examples of texts in the New Testament which provide the basis for the Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead, and that basis is Jesus Christ. Already in the Old Testament, God gave a promise to the Prophet Isaiah that: “He will destroy death forever. The Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces; the reproach of his people he will remove from the whole earth; for the Lord has spoken” (Isaiah 25:8)⁴⁸. The prophecy that “Death too shall be engulfed or destroyed forever” finds its fulfillment in Jesus in the New Testament. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus becomes victorious over death, and so Paul would proudly and confidently say in 1 Corinthians 15:54c-57: “Death is swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus

⁴⁷ Cf. the Roman Catholic Church’s “Scripture Reading” for the “Morning Prayer” of the *Office for the Dead* in: *The Divine Office: The Liturgy of the Hours According to the Roman Rite* (III).

⁴⁸ Quoted from the *New American Bible* (Revised Edition).

Christ.”⁴⁹ Thus, the believers in Christ share in Christ’s victory over death, and so Christ himself says in John 11:25: “I am the resurrection and the life; the one who believes in me, even if he/she dies, he/she will live.” (Emphasis mine).

One realises that Paul used the text of 1 Thess 4:14 as part of his consolation messages to the Thessalonian community of believers when there was the need for him to address the issue of mourning the dead in that community.⁵⁰ In the preceding verse of 1 Thess 4:13, it becomes evident that:

Paul addresses the problem of death which is ‘an obvious exponent of social disintegration’ in the community of believers in Thessalonica. His ‘pattern of exhortations, which includes references to eschatological motifs, provides a way for the Thessalonians to understand what happens to those who are asleep’ (before the parousia or the coming of the Lord), and his words of consolation (1 Thess 4:18) reinforce solidarity in the Christian community.⁵¹

In fact, the subject on which Paul wants to speak in 1 Thess 4:13-18 is already stated in 1 Thess 4:13 where Paul emphatically introduces his subject matter in terms of “about the dead,” or what he euphemistically expresses as “about those who are asleep” (*perì tōn koimōménōn*). What Paul says in 1 Thess 4:13 gives the clue that he wants to help assuage the grief of members of the community of believers who are mourning their dead relatives or loved ones. They are grieving because for them there is no hope for the dead to meet the Lord when he comes again. Paul then in his teachings applies a subject in “apocalyptic tradition” which talks about the “eschatological gathering of the Christ’s faithful” to assuage the grief of the members of the community of believers in Thessalonica.⁵² Thus, at the end of time, when the Lord comes again, the dead will be raised; and together with the living, they will be brought together with Jesus in God’s presence, and so the living will not have any advantage over the dead (1 Thess 4:14-18).

Paul’s exhortation in 1 Thess 4:14 and its related passages should be a guiding principle for the Akan Christians and all other Christians when it comes to the act of mourning for the dead. The hope for the resurrection of the dead and the appearance of all the dead in God’s presence should encourage people to focus more on praying for the dead than on organizing extravagant funerals which turn out to cause financial constraints on some poor families.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is a pity that many Christians in Ghana, especially those in Akan communities, fail to be guided by the gospel values and try as much as possible to exhibit simplicity and moderation in bidding farewell to the dead without any compromise. Unlike in most areas in the northern parts of Ghana where funeral observance is comparatively simple and involves not much money and resources, the funeral rites in areas where the Akan people occupy in the middle belt and southern parts of Ghana have a higher tempo and take the bereaved families much time, money, and resources to organize funerals. Godfred Nsiah is right to contend in the abstract of his paper that “as Christians believe that the dead in Christ will rise on the *Parousia* [or the second coming of Christ], then rituals and cultural practices that have negative effects on the socio-economic and Christian beliefs of surviving families should be avoided or modified.”⁵³ The rate at which funerals have been characterised by ostentation and hefty expenses in Akan communities and other societies in Ghana has become so alarming that a clarion call has been sounded in some churches and traditional societies to take measures and act to help check the menace.

Some dioceses of the Roman Catholic Church and other religious congregations in Ghana have been trying to hammer home the Christian understanding of death and the hereafter and the need to

⁴⁹ Quoted from the *New American Bible* (Revised Edition).

⁵⁰ See also the whole pericope of 1 Thess 4:13-5:11.

⁵¹ David Luckensmeyer, *The Eschatology of First Thessalonians (NTOA/StUNT 71)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 173; Owusu, *The Fate of the Dead and the Living at the Lord’s Parousia: Exegesis of 1 Thessalonians 1: 9-10; 4: 13-18; 5: 1-11*, 108.

⁵² Owusu, *The Fate of the Dead and the Living at the Lord’s Parousia: Exegesis of 1 Thessalonians 1: 9-10; 4: 13-18; 5: 1-11*, 108; Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (AB 32B)* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 262-263.

⁵³ Godfred Nsiah, “Reception of Paul’s Eschatological Teaching in Ghana: A Contextual Study of 1 Thess. 4:13-18,” *HTS Theologese Studies / Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (April 19, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i2.9065>.

avoid some traditional practices concerning burial and funeral rites which rather put unnecessary financial constraints on Christian bereaved families. Such steps are taken by the churches to create the awareness that the Gospel message should be able to reform some indigenous traditional practices and purify some social values concerning funerals which are lauded so much in society but create unnecessary competition and put financial stress on people. The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi, for example, published a booklet on 25th January 2011 to that effect. The booklet is entitled “Funeral Regulations,” and the preamble which spells out the purpose and objectives of the booklet reads as follows:

These regulations on funerals have one pastoral objective: to reduce the needless expenditure on the celebration of Christian funerals in the Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi and also to confirm our faith in Jesus, Our Resurrection and Life. Indeed, it is a fact that culturally Asantes have always paid the greatest respect to the dead and will do everything to accord the highest honour to the dead. This is commendable. This notwithstanding, this last respect for the dead is gradually becoming a financial burden to the bereaved family. This is simply because certain practices which culturally are at variance with the typical Asante sentiments are becoming part of funeral celebrations. A typical example is the elaborate serving of food and drinks. We expect all Catholics in the Kumasi Archdiocese to avoid as much as possible any show of ostentation in the burial and funeral of any Catholic. It is our hope that all Catholics will faithfully adhere to these regulations and all other regulations on funerals in the Kumasi Archdiocesan Statutes.⁵⁴

It becomes evident in the preamble to the Kumasi Archdiocesan Funeral Regulations that the serving of food and drinks at funerals takes a huge chunk of the funeral budget or expenses. In fact, much as the bereaved families cannot do away with this practice, it is recommended that they should find a moderate means of serving food and drinks at funerals. The preamble also sets it right that when it comes to funerals, the Asantes like other African Christians go by their traditional and cultural practices at the expense of their Christian belief. Elizabeth Mburu’s observation that African Christians sometimes find it difficult to practise their Christian faith in the face of traditional African values and practices is very true of the Akan Christians.⁵⁵

To avoid hefty expenses at funerals, the Archdiocese proposes that in preparation for the burial, the body shall not be kept in the morgue for more than forty days because the longer the body remains in the morgue the higher the cost of its preservation in the morgue. *Adekyeredee* (i.e., the many things arranged in a convoy for the burial and during the final ceremony) shall be completely abolished since such things cost huge sums of money. Besides, a modest coffin which is environmentally friendly, preferably a polished wooden coffin with a cross, shall be used to bury the dead. It is also recommended that as part of the *adesiedee* (i.e., the things used to bury the dead), “only the essentials such as rings and handkerchiefs and a very small amount of money shall be allowed in accordance with tradition.”⁵⁶ The enforcement and observance of such regulations would go a long way to help reduce the huge expenses incurred during funerals for church members. Unfortunately, much as such rules may have a positive impact and serve as a great relief for some Catholics, they appear to exist in theory since many bereaved families – especially those who consider that they have the means to afford funerals with high costs – look over them. It is, however, hoped that pastors, kings, traditional councils and all religious leaders would continue to join hands and put rules and regulations to guard against the excesses in funeral observance in the society today and that people would adhere to these clarion calls to help streamline all forms of ostentation at funerals. Flamboyant funerals often turn out to be so showy that people do not consider them as funerals or mourning for the dead but as mere social gatherings or fanfare. To safeguard the essence, sanctity and purpose of funeral observances, it behoves society or people not to set extravagance and much spending as the standard to measure or judge a successful funeral.

⁵⁴ See *Funeral Regulations* (Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi, 2011), v.

⁵⁵ Mburu, *African Hermeneutics*, 3.

⁵⁶ *Funeral Regulations* (Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi, 2011), 6, 3-12.

CONCLUSION

Funeral observance in Akan communities especially has been characterised by a lot of extravaganza in current times. This phenomenon creates unnecessary competition and puts pressure on most bereaved families who would like to spend money on funerals to meet societal standards. It is rather a pity that some Christians who live in these communities also join in such practices. Christians especially must know that Jesus himself was buried in a simple way after he died. Though Jesus was a great personality, when he died his relatives and friends did not search for the most fashionable coffin or tomb to lay his body in for burial. He was covered with a simple white linen cloth or shroud, and he was simply put in a tomb made of stones (Mark 15:46). His corpse was not preserved for a long time before it was buried, and the body was not laid in state with all kinds of decorations surrounding it. Even the expensive oil which Mary Magdalene, Mary (the mother of James), and Salome bought to prepare his body for burial became unnecessary because they did not have the chance to anoint Jesus' corpse with the oil (Mark 16:1-7). Everything concerning Jesus' burial and funeral rite was so simple and moderate. Jesus himself would not have wished that any flamboyant funeral of a sort would be observed for him after his death because he was sure of one thing, and that was what he valued most, that is: By his death and resurrection he was going back to God, the Father, who sent him to accomplish his work on earth (Luke 23:46).

Jesus' example should be the model for all Christians. Death should be seen as the opportunity for the deceased to meet his/her Creator. At the center of every Christian burial and funeral observance should be the belief in the resurrection of the dead and the need to pray for the dead and the bereaved family, so that the dead would meet God's favour and the bereaved family could be consoled and strengthened in the face of the loss of a beloved one.

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