

A Socio-economic and Religious Analysis of the *Adesiedee* (Burial Items) Rite in Akan *Dɔteyie* (Pre-burial Funeral)

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ABSTRACT

The reality of death is attested by everyday experiences in all human societies. Whilst death is a universal phenomenon, the rites associated with dying, death and funeral differ from society to society. The Akan community of Ghana performs many rites from the time that one's death is imminent till the final funeral rites are performed, and even afterward. One such rite is the presentation of *Adesiedee* (burial items). Whilst there are many publications about Akan funeral rites, *Adesiedee* has not received any significant scholarly attention. This study was, therefore, conducted to examine *adesiedee* rite from an Akan socio-religious perspective. It is an empirical research that collected data through participant observations, field surveys and interviews. The paper argued that Akan funeral rituals associated with laying-in-state and burying of the corpse are deeply rooted in the Akan belief in ancestors and the desire of the living Akan to maintain a good relationship with the supernatural. The paper found a close correlation between the Akan socio-economic and religious worldview and the rite of presenting *Adesiedee*. The research contributes to studies on Akan cultural and primal religion.

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Publication History

Received 13th June, 2023

Accepted 14th September, 2023

Published online 4th October, 2023

Keywords: *Adesiedee*, Akan, Ancestors, *Dɔteyie*, Funeral

INTRODUCTION

According to Peter K. Sarpong, the crucial turning points in the life of the Akan include; “(1) the time a person enters the world through birth, (2) when he comes of age and enters the world of adults, (3) when, through death, he departs from this world and enters the world of his forebears.”¹ This Akan belief is similar to the Kongo belief that the human life cycle is comparable to the four moments of the sun, namely, rising (birth), noon (maturity), setting (death) and midnight (existence in the other world and eventual rebirth).² From this perspective, the rising and setting of the sun signifies death and rebirth respectively. In the Akan context, each stage of life is celebrated with rituals and ceremonies referred to as “rites of passage.” One of such rites is a funeral.

Funeral rites are performed in almost all human societies. However, the nature of funeral celebrations differs from place to place based on the religious beliefs of the people group involved.³ The word “funeral” derives from the Latin *funus*, which can refer to the body (corpse) or funerary rites. This paper defines the term “funeral” as a ritual that honours, reveres, or sanctifies the life of the deceased and typically entails preparations for the burial or cremation of their body. Funeral rites are the extensive set of beliefs and customs that a culture

¹ Peter K. Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974), 71.

² Wyatt MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The BaKongo of Lower Zaire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 44.

³ Emmanuel Asante, *Theology and Society in Context: A Theologist's Reflections of Selected Topics* (Accra: SonLife Press, 2014), 32.

uses to commemorate its deceased, from the actual interment to the myriad memorials, prayers and rituals performed in their honour.

Funeral celebration is at the heart of the Akan culture and social life. Akan funerals are well-organised and highly-attended. The elaborate nature of Akan funerals has attracted scholarly attention and many studies have been conducted on this subject. Most of the existing literature focus on the actual funeral that happens from a time specified, usually in the afternoon, till the evening after the corpse is buried. There is almost no scholarly publication dedicated to the pre-burial rite. This research fills the existing literature lacuna by examining *Adesiedee*⁴ (burial items) rite in the context of the Akan pre-burial funeral rites.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dying and Death in the Akan Context

The Akan concept of death relates to their concept of personhood. In the Akan worldview, the human being consists of material and immaterial parts. The material part is the *nipadua* (human body, comprising the blood, flesh, bones, water and others) and the immaterial part comprises *kraa* (soul), *honhom* (spirit) and *ntorɔ* (determinant of character and personality). Death occurs when a person's soul (*kraa*) departs from the body (*nipadua*). The imagery of the *kraa* exiting the body at death is the reason why the Akan euphemistically talk about one's death as "*ne kraa afiri ne mu*" ("His/her soul has departed from his body") or "*wahwere ne kraa*" ("he/she has lost his/her soul"). The *honhom* is intrinsically and symbiotically connected to the *kraa* in such a way that the departure of one from the body means the automatic departure of the other. The *kraa* is believed to survive after death in a disembodied state and continues to live. Thus, the Akan consider death as affecting only the physical body, but not the immaterial *kraa*. After death, the disembodied *kraa* may become an ancestor living excellently in the ancestral realm (Bono-Twi: *Asamando*).⁵

Therefore, in Akan religious thought, death is a transition to another world. The transition of the spirit of the deceased from the world of the living to the ancestral realm requires certain rites to be performed to facilitate a smooth entrance into the ancestral world. The journey takes several days and involves climbing and descending steep mountains, crossing rivers, becoming weary, resting, eating, drinking and spending money.⁶ As a result of this belief, the Akan give the dying person water, either voluntarily or on request, to revive his/her soul for the journey into the ancestral realm.⁷ In most cases, the person dies immediately after drinking water. Traditionally, the Akan must be served water before he or she passes on.

The rite of pouring water into the throat of a dying Akan is usually accompanied by the following words: "Receive this water and drink and do not permit any evil to come whence you are setting out, and permit all women of this household to bear children."⁸ These words draw on the Akan belief in the role of the dead in the lives of their living relatives. Here, the person asks for fertility and glad tidings for the family. The act of offering water to the dying person and the request made by the offeror may be related to the Akan transactional approach to worship. The transactional approach to worship refers to the religious phenomenon where worshippers offer sacrifices to divinities and use that as the basis of requesting a favour from them. Here, the offering of water to the dying person may be considered the basis for the request for good things from the ancestral world.

As noted earlier, the Akan traditionally believe that the human soul continues to live after death. This leads to the concept of ancestorhood which deserves attention at this point.

Akan belief in ancestors

The Akan believe in the existence of the Supreme Being who is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Next to the Supreme Being are the ancestors (Bono-Twi: *Nananom nsamanfoɔ*) who are spirits of heroes and heroines

⁴ When used as a noun the word "*Adesiedee*" is capitalized and considered a proper noun; as an adjective it is written as *adesiedee*.

⁵ Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, "Concepts of the Soul among the Akan of the Gold Coast," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 21, No.1 (1951):24-31, 27; Eric Baffoe Antwi, *Creation in the Image of God: Human Uniqueness From the Akan Religious Anthropology to the Renewal of Christian Anthropology* (Doctoral dissertation, Duquesne University, 2016), 87; Peter K. Sarpong, *Peoples Differ* (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2002), 91.

⁶ Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, 38.

⁷ Samuel Ofori, *Christianity and African Culture: The Gospel in Asante Funeral Rites* (Np: Pentecost Press Ltd, 2014), 32; Kwame Arhin, "The Economic Implications of Transformations in Akan Funeral Rites," *Africa*, LXIV, no. 3, (1994), 310. Traditionally, it is the head of lineage who is responsible to give this last drink. However, because of migration the family head may not even be near the dying person and so the caretaker normally does it. As I will show later, during burial, the corpse is given other items to facilitate the transition to *Asamando*.

⁸ Ofori, *Christianity and African Culture*, 32.

who after death, have acquired super-human powers and can affect the lives of the living.⁹ In the Akan worldview, it is not every dead person who qualifies to become an ancestor. Certain conditions must be fulfilled for one's soul to attain a divinized state of the ancestor. First, ancestorship depends on lineage. One cannot be the ancestor of another person unless the two are related by blood. People normally consider their dead parents, grandparents, and uncles as their ancestors. One's dead friend cannot be an ancestor for the living friend because they do not relate by blood. Again, ancestorship requires a lifestyle worthy of emulation. Ancestors are considered morally upright and their lifestyle worthy of emulation. Therefore, unless one lives a good life, the person's spirit cannot become an ancestor. Sarpong defines a good person as one "who does not cause unnecessary troubles, or abuse his [or her] elders, juniors or equals, especially in public."¹⁰ More so, longevity and natural death (as opposed to accidental death) are required to qualify as an ancestor.¹¹ Accidental deaths (Bono-Twi: *atɔfo-wuo*)—such as death through suicide, poisoning and motor accident—disqualifies one from becoming an ancestor. However, an untimely death that occurs in the context of war does not disqualify one from becoming an ancestor; it rather honours the person for being patriotic and for serving his/her society, even to the point of death. Such a person should have died in war while "facing" the enemy and not while retreating (running away in fear).

In addition, one has to marry and procreate to qualify as an ancestor after death. The Akan consider it the responsibility of everyone to ensure the continuity of the family. Therefore, the one who refuses to marry and procreate to expand the family is not considered a good person. The married person is considered an adult but the unmarried is not considered an adult no matter his/her age. This means that adulthood, another requirement for ancestorship, is not determined by age alone but also by one's marital status. When someone becomes a chief, the person is considered as an adult (even if he is not married) because there are always stool wives for the chief. He is considered "married" because of the stool wives. In addition, one has to be given a befitting burial and elaborate funeral rites to facilitate the transition into the ancestral realm.

The ancestors are believed to be closer to the Supreme Being and more powerful than the living.¹² They are believed to play key roles in the lives of their living relatives. They are interested in the daily life of their living relatives and so they monitor whatever goes on in the world of the living. They preside over family meetings and punish or reward their living relatives according to their deeds.¹³ In this sense, they are considered as judges. One may look up to the ancestors to avenge his/her case, saying, "*Nananom ne wo nni*" ("May the ancestors deal with you"). The ancestors are also the custodians of the norms and traditions of the family and act as intermediaries between God and the living. They also give and sustain life. As the study demonstrates later, the Akan belief in ancestors informs most of their funeral practices. In the next section, the study discusses Akan's concept of funeral.

Ayiyɔ (funeral celebration) in the Akan context

Ayiyɔ or *ayie* (funeral celebration) is a core part of Akan social occasions. The Akan perform many rites during funerals, following traditions passed on from their forefathers. Traditionally, the Akan perform elaborate funeral rites for those who die naturally at a ripe age. CNN's Paula Newton rightly observes that Akan/Ghanaian "funerals are an opportunity to celebrate the life of the dearly departed. A large number of mourners attend funerals—the more, the better."¹⁴ However, unnatural death (for example, dying through suicide, poisoning or accident) may deprive one of *ayie* or reduce the attention given to the person's funeral. Also, the Akan do not organise funeral celebrations for children because of the belief that organising funerals for them will cause the death of more children in the family.¹⁵ Another reason is that children are not well integrated into the society and so their departure does not require extensive rites.

Akan funeral rites can be divided broadly into two—*dɔteyie*¹⁶ (pre-burial funeral) and *ayipa* (actual funeral)—with specific foci and rituals associated with each stage (phase) of the funeral. *Dɔteyie* focuses more

⁹ Emmanuel Asante, *Culture, Politics and Development: Ethical and Theological Reflections on the Ghanaian Experience* (Accra: Combert Impressions, 2007), 35-37.

¹⁰ Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, 35.

¹¹ Kwesi Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (London: Longmans & Todd, 1984), 194.

¹² Asante, *Culture, Politics and Development*, 36.

¹³ Asante, *Culture, Politics and Development*, 36.

¹⁴ Paula Newton, "The Long Goodbye: Why Funerals are Big Deals in Ghana," *On The Road Series* (2014). [Accessed online from <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/03/11/world/africa/on-the-road-ghana-funerals/> on 13th June, 2023].

¹⁵ Nana Agyei-Kodie Anane-Agyei, *Ghana's Brong-Ahafo Region: The Story of an African Society in the Heart of the World* (Accra: Abibrem Communications, 2015), 156.

¹⁶ This refers to funeral rites that take place from the time the corpse is laid in state till the burial.

on the deceased's transition into the realm of the dead whereas *ayipa* centres on the living even though both rites come together to form a complete Akan funeral. In the olden days, when there were no morgues to preserve corpses for a long time, *dɔteyie* was usually performed within three days (or a few days) after a person's death. Sympathisers attended the *dɔteyie* though they did not usually make donations to the bereaved family. The *ayipa* (actual funeral) was then celebrated later at an appropriate date after all the necessary publicity and preparations were made.

In modern times, *ayipa* normally follows *dɔteyie* because the existence of morgues for the preservation of corpses makes it possible to keep corpses for family members to prepare adequately for both funerals to be done in a day or two. Performing both the *dɔteyie* and *ayipa* rites together saves sympathisers the stress of travelling from their places of abode to the town/village where the funeral is celebrated on two or more occasions. The modern system is economical for the sympathisers. However, the preservation of corpses at the morgue for a long time also comes with huge economic implications for the deceased family. The moderate way might be preserving the corpse for a few days/weeks and performing the *dɔteyie* and *ayipa* rites on the same day.

As part of *dɔteyie*, the corpse is laid in state (after a ritual bath and dressing) for public viewing and farewell messages before burial. The laying-in-state normally takes place from 5:00 am to 9:00 am on the day assigned for the *dɔteyie*. While the corpse is laid in state, the family of the deceased gathers to receive visitors. Upon arrival at the funeral ground, one greets the family members and other sympathisers seated under *mpata* (canopies) before or after filing past the deceased's mortal remains. The *nkyea* (greetings) is done in the anticlockwise direction (from right to left); meaning, one starts a public greeting (normally in the form of a handshake) from the people on their right side. The Bono community explains the Akan anticlockwise-directional formal greetings norm by the saying, "*Yeetwa boodee a yetwa firi nifa*" ("The act of cutting a plantain plant takes place in the anticlockwise direction"). The above saying underlines the predominantly agricultural activities that go on in the Bono/Akan society and how this occupation informs the Akan social life. Another school of thought is that the right-ward direction in Akan greeting is due to the Akan perception that the right hand is the hand that should be used to handle "clean" things.¹⁷ Thus, the left hand is (in a way) considered "unclean" (or "inferior") and so the right-ward direction is more appropriate in greeting. This same point explains why the right hand is used in greeting and not the left hand.

After paying their last respect, the visitors sit down under the *mpata* where they are offered water and welcomed by the deceased family. Though it is obvious that they have come to mourn with the bereaved family, custom demands that the family linguist asks them about their mission. The visitors then respond by briefly telling the host why they have paid this visit, starting from how they got the news about the deceased's demise, how the news affected them because of their association with the deceased and how their journey to the place went.

As part of the farewell ritual, some items are presented as gifts to the dead. The collection of these items usually begins at about 7:00 a.m. Known as *Adesiedee* (burial items), these items are usually donated by the following categories of people: The traditional ruler, the head of the lineage and his people, the widow(s)/widower, the children, the maternal and paternal relations, daughters-in-law and sons-in-law of the deceased, and close friends. The widow's/widower's items receive the most attention and are presented last, just before the body is put in the coffin. The constituents of *Adesiedee*, the act of presenting it and the socio-economic and religious implications of the items are among the key components of the rest of the study.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed an empirical research approach (based on both primary and secondary sources) to collect data on *Adesiedee* in Akan funerals. The choice of the empirical research approach was informed by the researcher's quest to have a deeper and more practical understanding of the practice under investigation. The following methods were used. First, semi-structured interview questions were used to obtain data for the research. The researcher selected five (5) people who have expert knowledge about Akan funeral rites and/or are directly involved in the presentation of burial items. The answers provided by the interviewees (in Akan) were transcribed into English to make them accessible to non-Akan speakers. Secondly, relying on the ethnographic technique, the researcher attended five different funerals at different places (in the Ashanti and Bono regions of Ghana), and observed how the *adesiedee* rite was performed and the rationale behind what went on during these funerals. The author made an audio recording of relevant speeches and later transcribed

¹⁷ This information was gathered in the author's telephonic conversation with Rev. Isaac Oduro-Boateng of the Methodist Church Ghana on 14th September, 2023 (when the author was responding to the reviewer comments).

them into Akan and/or English. Thirdly, the researcher accessed relevant portions of video recordings of Akan funerals to gather information. Information gathered from participants' observation, interviews, video recordings and literature sources—obtained from books, theses, journal articles and others—were pieced together and analysed thematically.

With this background, the paper proceeds to present and analyse data collected from the field survey. The areas considered are the items presented, the manner of presentation and the socio-economic and religious significance of these items.

PRESENTATION OF DATA

Adesiedee rite

As indicated earlier, the *kunafoɔ*'s (widow's) *Adesiedee* is the most important presentation in the pre-burial funeral. The purpose of this section is to examine what is presented and how it is presented.¹⁸ Various changes in Akan material culture due to modern civilisation, urbanisation and globalisation have altered the nature of items presented to the dead in modern times. In the olden days, these items were meant solely to be buried with the dead to be used in the next world. In modern times, most *Adesiedee* are given in monetary terms, referred to as "*hyen-ti-adee*" (lorry fare) for the journey from the land of the living to the land of the dead. However, that of a widow remains in material terms, with or without money.

Presentation of burial item (*Adesiedee*)

The following account of the presentation of *Adesiedee* was recorded during participant observation in two funerals (one in Sunyani and the other in Kumasi) and by watching video recordings of the presentation.¹⁹ In all cases, the *Adesiedee* were arranged nicely in golden or silver buckets and plates and carried by selected maidens (some of whom were apprentices of the presenter). All those carrying the items wore specially-designed clothes. Led by the presenter, the maidens carried the items and walked majestically to the funeral gathering and stood directly opposite the place where the corpse was laid in state. The movement to the funeral ground was accompanied by *kete* music (traditional Akan music) and a young lady danced in front of the procession.

Immediately they got to the designated place for the presentation of the items, the *kete* music stopped. Instantly, the trained announcer/presenter took the microphone and called for attention from the chiefs, family members, and all sympathisers, saying, "*Agoo!* ('knock') distinguished chiefs and queen mothers, family head and all ladies and gentlemen, men of God, heads of department, church members, sympathisers, widow and her family, and all loved ones gathered here. It is time to present the widow's burial items." The presenter began praising the deceased (Nana Yaw) and expressing sorrow for the way sickness and death dealt with him. Speaking on behalf of the widow, the presenter said:

*Yen adee nyinaa Nana [Agyei]. Nana twereboɔ enna, Nana [Agyei], our all. Nana, a person for all, our
ɔdodoɔ biribi, yen adee papa bi Nana, barima ena. precious one, Nana. Where are you going hurriedly
Ehen na worekorɔ a worepe ntem sei? Wo yere ne like this? Your wife and children say, "Sorry! Sorry
womma se: 'Nana due oo due! Due ne adunom! Due for all the drugs you took. Sorry, for the medicine you
ne nnuro tɔ! Due ne ɔbre! Nana due ne mpaneɔ wɔ! bought. Sorry, for the struggles in life. Sorry, about
Aa! Nana wahunu amane, due wate!"²⁰ the injections you took! Ah! Nana you have really
suffered, sorry!"*

The presenter then proceeded to present bed sheet (*keɛɛ*), pillows, blankets (*bommo*), bread, white cloth and *kente* cloth,²¹ candles, matches, flowers and handkerchiefs, cola nuts, toffee and palm wine (see photograph below).²²

¹⁸ Even though the focus is on the widow's presentation, the study also makes references to presentation by other persons where necessary.

¹⁹ The information were gather from Mr. Kwasi Kankam's funeral at Odumasi (Sunyani) in July 2022; Adwoa Yeboah Agyei, "*Adesiedee* (farewell rites) at a Ghanaian funeral" (2020) [accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmKj7DSaRj4>] (4th May, 2023).

²⁰ The author transcribed and translated this from Agyei, "*Adesiedee* (farewell rites) at a Ghanaian funeral."

²¹ According to Ama Korkor, the white cloth and the *kente* are not required if the widow is the one who bought the attire used to dress the deceased. However, in the case of the death of a traditional ruler, the *kente* is a necessarily part of the *Adesiedee*. In the case the kind of *kente* and the design depends in the status of the ruler. Ama Korkor, *Interview by author*, Kumasi, 6th June 2023.

²² This picture was taken from Agyei, "*Adesiedee* (farewell rites) at a Ghanaian funeral." The presenter (in blue T-shirt) is Adwoa Yeboah Agyei, a popular radio and Television presenter, who also has a traditional music group. She has a number of apprentices, one of whom is Ama Korkor who was interviewed in this research.



Presentation of Adesiedee

After the presentation, the presenter thanked the audience for their attention. The items were sent to the head of the bereaved family who then inspected them and directed where they should be sent and how they should be used. The deceased family then went and thanked the widow for the presentation done to honour her later husband and his family. Normally the deceased family has people assigned to thank donors. The foregoing discourse forms the basis for the discussions that follow in the sections below.

ANALYSES AND DISCUSSIONS

Socio-Religious Significance of Selected Items

The presentation of the burial items by the widow is meant to honour the deceased and the deceased family. By presenting the items the widow is telling the audience that the deceased lived a good life and married according to laid down Akan traditions. Therefore, the deceased should be given a place in the ancestral world because he lived responsibly. The *adesiedee* rite also helps in the grieving process as they serve as a way of saying farewell to the deceased. After presenting these items the widow is satisfied that she has done what is expected of her and she has, by this act, given due honour to the deceased husband. It is also a way of appreciating the deceased family for the kind of man they gave her as husband. Thus, it maintains a cordial relationship between the deceased family and the living spouse. Each of the items presented has socio-religious relevance which this section outlines.

Candles and Matches

The candles and matches are given for at least two reasons. Firstly, they are given to the deceased to use to light his/her path to the ancestral world, especially during the night when darkness falls.²³ As noted earlier, the Akan belief that the journey to the ancestral realm takes several days and involves ascending and descending mountains and cross water bodies. It is believed that the deceased will use the candles as a source of light during the night. Not all the matches go into the grave. Part of it is shared among the deceased family members and other people.

The second reason is a contemporary development that emerged due to the introduction of Christianity into the Akan community. The candles and matches are interpreted as the fire of the Holy Spirit prepared to burn any evil spirit that approaches the widow and children (if any) to harm them. This interpretation comes from the church setting where the Holy Spirit is portrayed as a consuming fire. This belief has a biblical foundation. Many years after Joel prophesied about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Joel 2:28), John the Baptist identified Jesus as the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Luke 3:16). On the Day of Pentecost when the outpouring of the Holy Spirit occurred to inaugurate the Christian church, he appeared in the form of fire (Acts 2:1-4). The metaphor of the Spirit as fire underlines his purifying and empowering activities. The Spirit burns all impurities just as the extraction of gold through burning removes all chaff to yield pure gold.²⁴ Given the foregoing discourse, the candles and the matches are considered spiritual weapons for

²³ Agyei, "Adesiedee (farewell rites) at a Ghanaian funeral."

²⁴ The Holy Spirit may be invited by the believer to come with his purifying fire to purify the one who invited him.

the deceased family, especially the widow/widower and children. More so, from the Christian perspective, the candles also stand for the word of God that directs the human path. Psalm 119:105 declares, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (NRSV). This scripture illuminates how we can navigate life’s obscurities.

When presented by a daughter-in-law at the funeral of a parent-in-law, the fire signals a warning to women who would come near to the husband of the daughter-in-law who presented them. The presenter would usually give this caution: “The man (whose parent is dead and whose wife is presenting the items) is legally married, so all other women should clear off; they should not come near him, or else the fire (Holy Ghost fire) would burn them.” It is believed that single women use funeral celebrations as opportunities to find husbands or concubines. Therefore, the presentation of the items becomes an opportunity to ward such women from the husband of the widow. In this case, women who might entice the widow’s husband to come after them are seen as the evil that the fire is to burn.

Cola Nuts and Palm Wine

The cola nuts and palm wine given to the deceased family symbolise their state of pain and sorrow.²⁵ Palm wine is the Akan traditional drink used for such occasions as marriage ceremonies, festivals, pouring of libation and funerals. The palm wine is referred to as *tete nsa* (ancient [traditional] wine) because it has been there since time immemorial. The palm wine also highlights that the widow was officially (traditionally) married by the late husband. It was this drink that was used for the marriage ceremony and now she is giving it to the family of the deceased to show her appreciation of the Akan marriage tradition. From this perspective, it may be considered as symbolically breaking the marriage union between the deceased and the living spouse.²⁶ In the Akan context, the dissolution of a customary (traditional) marriage requires the wife to return of drinks (representing the drink that the husband gave to the woman’s family during the marriage ceremony) to the husband (husband’s family).

In a traditional Akan setting, the relatives of the deceased refrain from eating their delicacy during the period of grieving and only resume normal eating habits when the burial rites have been completed.²⁷ The practice of fasting is known among the Bono people as *mmuada die*, refraining from eating anything or one’s favourite food. There is a ban on cooking and the fire in their kitchen is put out as a result of the passing of a relative; so the Bono people will say *fie gya adum* (The fire in the house has been put out). Early in the morning (during the mourning period), the deceased family is served with cola nut and palm wine.²⁸ The cola and the palm wine are meant to serve as food during the period of the ban on cooking. Cola nuts have a bitter taste which symbolizes the pain of the deceased family. Again, cola nut has high caffeine content, which increases energy and reduces hunger.

The deceased family uses the *mmuada die* to symbolically express their sorrow for the demise of their loved one. Typically, some of the red, white or pinkish liquid from the cola nut is shown on the lips like lip gloss to signal to onlookers that one is in a state of sorrow.²⁹ This state of the mourners is expressed by the Akan as “*yeato abese no*” (“we have painted our lips with cola”).³⁰ This practice is expressed in the funeral dirge “*Se wo mane a, mane me denkyem breboɔ, na se mannya egya a, mawe no mono*” (“If you decide to send me a gift, please send me a special cola nut, [*denkyem breboɔ*, crocodile’s liver], which I can eat raw and uncooked”).³¹ According to Korkor the cola nut is referred to as *denkyem breboɔ* because its shape and color resembles a liver.³² Even though the above dirge underlines that no cooking goes on in the house of the deceased person, the grandchildren of the dead (if any or the children in the deceased family) are exempted from the *mmuada die*. They are probably considered too young to fast, so they are allowed to eat. These days, total fasting is not practised. The deceased family may cook or may be provided with meals, but not usually their favourite. The day for the burial climaxes the period of fasting. After the funeral, the deceased family is not required to continue fasting.

²⁵ Korkor, Interview by author. In addition to or instead of the cola nuts, toffees can be presented. The toffees presented are usually of different tastes, sweet, sour, bitter and so on, showing different conditions in life.

²⁶ This interpretation is the author’s.

²⁷ Anane-Agyei, Ghana’s Brong Ahafo Region, 156; Korkor, Interview by author.

²⁸ This practice, which was common in the olden days, is hardly observed these days.

²⁹ Anane-Agyei, Ghana’s Brong Ahafo Region, 156.

³⁰ Korkor, Interview by author.

³¹ Asante, Theology and Society in Context, 41.

³² Korkor, Interview by author.

The palm wine provided (as part of *Adesiedee*) is used to serve their visitors. It also reminds the deceased family of how sorrowful they are as a result of the demise of their relative. Again, part of it may be used to perform libation when the family reaches the cemetery for the burial of their deceased member.

Water and Beverages

The bottles of water are dedicated to the deceased to refresh themselves on their journey to the ancestral world.³³ As the departed soul embarks on this transcendent voyage, the water serves as a source of sustenance, ensuring their vitality in the spiritual realm. It is a gesture of profound respect, a symbolic means of ensuring the comfort and well-being of the departed on their transition to the ancestral world. Furthermore, water takes on another dimension of significance as it is also shared with visitors by the grieving family. In Akan culture, the act of presenting water to a guest is a gesture of hospitality and respect. When one visits, the guest presents water to the visitor before asking about the person's mission. Water is, therefore, very important in the domestic setting, more so in the celebration of funerals.

The inclusion of sweet beverages such as Coca-Cola and Fanta in this ritual carries a poignant message. These items are offered to the deceased as a means of ensuring their comfort and satisfaction in the ancestral world. Upon their arrival in the spiritual realm, ancestors often inquire about the welfare of their living descendants. The sweet beverages become tokens of reassurance, testifying that everything is well with the living.³⁴ Thus, the departed soul presents these items to the ancestors as a way of affirming that their descendants are thriving well.

Handkerchiefs and Flower

Four different handkerchiefs, white, red, black and blueish colours, are usually presented to be distributed to sympathisers to wipe their tears. The colours are carefully chosen based on the Akan worldview about colours. In the Akan setting, the colour "white" stands for victory, strength and life. Though the deceased family is mourning, they believe there is victory after death because the dead continue to live in another world as an ancestor.³⁵ There is the belief that the living shall meet the dead again to continue life. The white handkerchiefs are shared for the sympathisers to remind them to be courageous and take consolation in the victory of the deceased. The colour "red" signifies danger, sorrow and difficulties in life. The idea is that even though the demise of their relative is sorrowful and has endangered the life of the living relatives, they should brace themselves and try to overcome their fears.

The color "black" symbolises sorrow/mourning and so the black handkerchief underlines the state of the deceased family and sympathisers. It is not merely a representation of the sorrow at hand but also a powerful symbol of the inevitability of death itself. The Akan express the inevitability of death in such sayings as: "*Wuo atwedee baako mforo*" ("everyone will climb the ladder of death"). The black handkerchief, therefore, reminds the mourners of their own mortality. It is a sobering reflection that as they mourn for their departed loved one, they are also mourning for themselves, recognizing the universal journey that awaits all. There is a Bono/Akan saying that "*Bi ayie ase ne yeyo ye ho ayie*" ("It is at someone's funeral that we celebrate our own funeral"), meaning as one attends another person's funeral, the person is reminded of his/her own death and therefore mourns for him/herself. Thus, this saying encapsulates the notion that attending another person's funeral serves as a stark reminder of one's own eventual passing. This concept highlights the depth of reflection and introspection that occurs during Akan funerals, as mourners not only grieve the loss of a loved one but also contemplate their own mortality.

In contrast to the mournful black, "blue" in Akan culture symbolizes comfort and the continuity of life. Therefore, blue handkerchiefs are bestowed upon mourners as tokens of solace. It gives a sense of reassurance amid the somber atmosphere, signifying that life persists even in the face of loss. Briefly, the blue handkerchiefs serve as a gesture of empathy and support, offering a glimmer of hope amidst the darkness of grief.

The flower is a sign of love and identification.³⁶ In the past, palm trees or shrubs were planted on graves to mark their location for future visits. In contemporary society, flowers have taken on this role. They are a symbol of love, respect, and identification. Placing flowers on the grave is a heartfelt expression of love for the

³³ Korkor, *Interview by author*. Mary Ampomah, *Interview by author*, Odumasi 22nd July, 2022.

³⁴ Akua Forkuo, *Interview by author*, Kumasi 22nd April 2023.

³⁵ Forkuo, *Interview by author*.

³⁶ Forkuo, *Interview by author*.

departed. It serves as a means of ensuring that, whenever the deceased family visit the cemetery they will be able to identify where their relative was buried.

Pillow (*sumuɛ*), Mat (*kɛtɛ*) and Cloth

The ancestral world is full of activities. However, after the day's work, night falls for them to sleep. The mat and pillow are presented to be used by the deceased. The mat is also seen as the last mat that the widow is laying for the deceased husband to sleep on.³⁷ This means the ancestors live a similar life as the living.

Akan traditional clothes have names that carry important messages. In one of the funerals that was witnessed and in one of those watched on YouTube, the cloth presented was named "*Wafa-me-nwa*" ("You have picked me [like] a snail"). The name of the cloth is drawn from the Akan hunting exercise in the forest. When people go to the forest in search of game, they go with weapons such as guns, cutlasses, catapults, bows and spears to hunt. Some hunters return victorious, having successfully captured their prey, while others tragically become victims of the forest, falling prey to wild animals in their pursuit. Within the hunting enterprise, there exists a striking contrast, embodied by the snail. Unlike larger, more aggressive animals, the snail is the epitome of simplicity in the hunt. It requires no weapons, no strenuous effort, and no battle to claim it. When a hunter encounters a snail, there is no chase, no resistance, and no need for confrontation. The hunter simply reaches out, picks up the snail, and it offers no agitation, runs away, or puts up any fight to defend itself.³⁸

The choice of the *Wafa-me-nwa* cloth, therefore, serves profound purpose. It is chosen to symbolize and highlight the ease with which death claimed the life of the deceased. Just as the snail offers no resistance to the hunter's hand, so too did the deceased surrender to the inevitability of death. The *Wafa-me-nwa* cloth, therefore, reminds moruners of the fragile and transient nature of life and highlights that, like the snail, everyone has their appointed time and may meet their fate without resistance.

The Economic Significance of *Adesiedee* Rite

The presentation of the burial items does not only have socio-religious value, it also has economic implications and significance. The presentation of burial items by sympathisers is based on the principle of reciprocity. The presentation is made publicly for the deceased family to take note of the donor so that they can reciprocate in case the donor is dead or is bereaved. Families whose members do not often attend other people's funerals may have the funeral of their relative poorly attended. The Bono people would normally describe that family as, "*Bennkɔ ayie*" ("They do not attend [other people's] funerals"). Therefore, routinely skipping funeral gatherings is to be avoided. So the Akan say, "*Ayie yɛ nkyankogya*" ("Funeral is about coming to mourn with me and I also coming to mourn with you"). People are encouraged to be present at funerals and to help in the mourning process and in doing so, grief over their own death that awaits them. The Bono-Twi expression, "*meesu me wuda mu*" ("I am weeping over the day I will die") underlines this point.

In addition, the value of the items establishes the socio-economic status of the donor. Donating expensive items underscores one high economic status. Moreover, the quantity and quality of the funeral gifts displayed in front of the assembled mourners either raises or lowers the lineage's social standing. That is why a deceased family may list specific items for their in-laws to present to ensure that the social status of the deceased family is raised. It is for the same reason that people try to renovate their dilapidated family houses before organising funeral celebrations. Some people live in the city and are famous among their folks. They consider it embarrassing for their city friends to come to their village and see their family house in a dilapidated state. Such wealthy people may, therefore, sponsor the rehabilitation of their family house to maintain their high socio-economic standards. Some people even go to the extent of constructing the road that leads to their village. The same is the reason why family members are made to buy a new cloth for each funeral.

The items for the *adesiedee* rite are costly. The cost includes the individual items, the hiring of the presenter, the hiring of containers for the items, and the hiring of people maidens to carry the items. To maintain high socio-economic standards, people go to the extent of securing loans to cater for this and other funeral-related expenses. The widow normally relies on donations from sympathisers to repay such loans. In some cases, the high cost of the burial ritual and other funeral rites may impoverish the spouse after the funeral.

On the other hand, the trade in *adesiedee* commodities has created a thriving market, especially during weekends when most Akan funerals are celebrated. Elderly women often play a significant role in this market, as they are the custodians of tradition and are well-versed in the significance of each item. The presenters/aanouncers charge exorbitant fees for their services, which include not only the presentation of the

³⁷ Forkuo, *Interview by author*.

³⁸ Agyei, "Adesiedee (farewell rites) at a Ghanaian funeral"; Forkuo, *Interview by author*.

items but also the employment of young ladies to assist them. This multi-tiered approach not only ensures the smooth execution of the ritual but also creates employment opportunities for the younger generation. These announcers and presenters become skilled facilitators, preserving the authenticity of the *adesiedee* rite while adapting it to contemporary needs. In a way, this contributes to the socio-economic development of society as it helps in improving the living standards of those whose services are employed in the process.

Funeral Procession to the Cemetery

The last part of the *doteyie* is the burial of the corpse. After all the necessary customs are performed, the mortal remains of the deceased are put into the coffin or casket ready for burial. The *abusuapanin* (that is, *dee ɔte ayi ketɛ so*, “the one who sits upon the funeral mat”, the one responsible for the organisation of the funeral) then pours libation with few family members present, to officially seek permission from the supernatural realm for the body to be put into the casket. The libation is also meant to inform the ancestors that one of their kinsmen is coming to join them. The libation prayer may go like this: “Let your family have a long life and health. May we get money for your funeral. Do not let any of us fall sick. May the women bear children.”³⁹ This prayer is similar to the one that accompanies the offering of the last drink to the dying person (which was considered earlier in this work). These prayers draw from the Akan belief that their ancestors have the power to bless them. As a sign of respect and accountability, the family head enumerates all the contributions made to the deceased. It will be disastrous for the living to steal anything donated to the dead. The burial items⁴⁰ are then placed in the coffin beside the corpse. The firstborn of the dead person is invited to say a final farewell to the deceased. Then, the coffin is covered and nailed.

After this, the coffin is carried to the cemetery by young men selected from the deceased family. In the olden days, Akan coffins were made from unpolished boards of *Wawa*, *Dum*⁴¹ or Mahogany. Today, coffins have progressed from simple to complex forms where various customized coffins are made not only from wood but also from plastics, metal, fibreboard and fibreglass. Bono mourners laud expensive coffins with such statements as “*Ne mma he ayɔ adeɛ oo!*” (“His/her children [the children of the deceased] have done well!”), underscoring the responsibility of the children to buy the coffin for their dead parents. These days, some professionals carry the coffin to the cemetery.⁴² Immediately the coffin is brought out of the house, it is made to touch the earth three times and after the third time, it is allowed to rest on the ground briefly.⁴³ This is meant “to give *Asaase Yaa* (the Earth Goddess) due notice and warning.”⁴⁴ In Akan cosmology, the Earth is not viewed as an inanimate object but as a living, nurturing entity. *Asaase Yaa* is seen as the mother of all living things, and she provides sustenance, fertility, and abundance to the world. The Akan people believe that *Asaase Yaa* is responsible for the growth of crops, the abundance of natural resources, and the general well-being of the land.

After this, the people proceed to the cemetery, accompanied by singing of dirges (wailing), drumming and dancing. The funeral procession is always large because it is believed that the crowd determines the crowd of ancestors who will meet the deceased to welcome him/her. The funeral process is led by the *abusuapanin* (or his representative) with branches of *somme* (*cortus sp.*) plant in both hands which he regularly touches the coffin with, saying “[*Asomasi*], *mepae wo kra ne yen ntam*” (“[Name of deceased], I separate your spirit from us”).⁴⁵ This act is meant to sever the deceased’s earthly relationship with the living and facilitate his/her transition into the ancestral realm. Later, one branch of the *somme* plant is buried with the corpse and another is put under the pillow of the one who performs this rite as a means of warding off the *samane* (ghost) of the deceased.⁴⁶ When the procession gets close to the cemetery, a gun is fired thrice to prompt the *nananom nsamanfoɔ* (“ancestors”) to meet their relative is coming to them.

Upon reaching the cemetery the *abusuapanin* says another prayer through the pouring of libation for the deceased to be accepted into the ancestral world. Wailing is very aggressive and loud at this point since that is the last chance for the dead person to “hear” the mourner. However, the dirge changes from “*Mene wo beko oo! Mene wo beko oo!*” (“I will go with you! I will go with you!”) at the time when the body was in state to

³⁹ Rattray as cited in Arhin, “The Economic Implications of Transformations in Akan Funeral Rites,” 311.

⁴⁰ It is not everything that was presented that will be buried with the corpse. So the “burial items” in this case refers to the items selected to be buried with the corpse and not the totality of the items presented as burial items.

⁴¹ Or *Odum*.

⁴² If the deceased was a member of a church, then the church will conduct a burial service for him/her at either the funeral grounds or the chapel before the coffin is carried to the cemetery.

⁴³ Ofori, *Christianity and African Culture*, 41.

⁴⁴ Ofori, *Christianity and African Culture*, 41.

⁴⁵ Ofori, *Christianity and African Culture*, 41-42.

⁴⁶ Ofori, *Christianity and African Culture*, 42.

“*Bue! Na wode me gyaa hwane oo*” (“Woe! Who did you leave me with!”). This means that the initial cry “*Mene wo bekɔ oo! Mene wo bekɔ oo!*” is not to be taken literally. It simply expresses the mourners’ deep affection for the dead and the pain they are now going through because of the demise of the loved one. Initially the cry focus on this love but later it focuses on how the living would suffer without the deceased. The cry also underlines the key role that the deceased played in the life of the mourner. In the midst of the loud cry, the casket will be lowered into the grave that has been dug already for that purpose. The dead is buried with the legs pointing to the village so that he/she might find his/her way home when he/she wakes up.

After the grave has been covered nicely with the soil that was dug out from the pit, the people return home in sorrow. They wash their hands with water in a basin with *somme* leaves in it to ward off evil spirits. The purification ritual must be completed before reporting what transpired at the burial site to those who were left behind. In contemporary times some of these customs have been modified into the usage of hand sanitiser and rubbing alcohol. The general idea behind this act was to prevent infection which might have been carried from the graveside or the cemetery. Also, “*brɛ-suo*”, water for refreshment, is offered to those who went to the burial site.

This is followed by the *ayipa* which takes place at a funeral ground (under *mpata*) where the family of the deceased sits down to receive sympathizers. The time to start the *ayipa* varies between the Bonos and the Ashantis. For the Bonos, the *ayipa* starts immediately after the family returns from the cemetery, normally before noon. The Ashantis, however, take a break after returning from the cemetery and start the *ayipa* at about 2:00 pm or even later. The closing time for most Akan communities is 6:00 pm, though the widow or the widower normally leaves earlier (not later than 5:00pm) because of the restriction that they must not be found outside late.

CONCLUSION

Arguably, the most important aspect of Akan funerals is to facilitate a smooth transition of the spirit of the dead to the realm of the ancestors. This conclusion is supported by McCaskie’s assertion that, when a person dies, “the indestructible spirit component of the human individual had to be managed back into the continuity from whence it had emanated. On one hand, properly transacted mortuary rituals [are] the indispensable instruments of that process of management. On the other hand, imperfectly performed or neglected mortuary rituals [would leave] the departed in anxious uncertainty of limbo”⁴⁷ which would prompt the dead to harass the living and exact retribution from them. The point is that the rituals carried out during the funeral celebration also serve to mend any potential rifts in the social structure that death might create. It is thought that the deceased, both as a corpse and a spirit, could pose a threat. Therefore, elaborate ritualistic processes are carried out to ensure the deceased’s happiness and safe passage into the spirit world is partially explained by the perceived threat. The belief is that life in the ancestral world is the same as life in the land of the living. Therefore, one needs to go with the items used in the land of the living to have a successful life in the land of the dead. It is because of this belief that one of the chief’s servants may be killed to accompany him and serve him just as he had servants in his earthly life. For the same reason, a woman may even volunteer to be killed to accompany the chief as his first wife in the ancestral world whilst a man, wishing to become the chief’s linguist or cook, might also volunteer to die and go with him. In the modern world, a sheep is slaughtered for the king instead of a human being. The point is that the *adesiedee* rite ensures not only a successful transition into the ancestral realm but also a successful stay in that sphere.

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⁴⁷ McCaskie cited in Osei-Mensah Aborampah, “Women's Roles in the Mourning Rituals of the Akan of Ghana,” *Ethnology*, 38(3) (1999): 257-271, 261

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