MONEY AND DEATH: FUNERAL BUSINESS IN ASANTE, GHANA

Marleen de Witte

In Ghana money and death are inextricably interwoven. Every death triggers a flow of money and the funeral business flourishes. The elaborate funeral celebrations during which no trouble or expense is spared contrast sharply with the daily struggle for the primary necessities of life. They are great public events, where families compete for prestige and respect by showing off wealth, and by publicly conforming to norms of solidarity and respect for the dead. Weeks or even months and millions of cedis\(^1\) are spent in organising an event, which impresses everybody. A funeral, more than a wedding or any other ceremony, should be grand and successful.

Every Saturday is funeral day. In every mid-sized town there are two or more funerals. Hundreds of people come together to pay their last respects to a deceased loved one, or to sympathise with a bereaved friend. People dress up and travel to visit a funeral in another town or village. In turn, they expect the bereaved family to entertain them with show, music, dance, drinks, and sometimes food. In the evening it can be hard to find transport back to town, when trotros (minibuses for public transport) are stuffed with funeral guests going home. And every Saturday night people dressed in black and red funeral cloth flock together in Hotel de Kingsway to end the day’s funeral by dancing to the tunes of highlife music. Funerals are at the heart of Asante culture and social life. Asante funerals are also the terrain of great creativity, where various forms of expression and art come together. Cultural groups perform traditional drumming or songs; people show their dancing skills; highlife musicians compose popular songs on the deep sorrow caused by death; pieces of poetic oratory praise the life of the deceased; portrait paintings and sculptures are put on the grave; photographs are enlarged, framed and exhibited or printed on T-shirts; video shots are taken and edited into a beautiful document; people dress up in the latest funeral fashion; and sometimes scenes from the life of the deceased are acted out in theatre. Death, more than any other life event, seems to inspire people to artistic creations.

Marleen de Witte is an anthropologist working at the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam. She wrote her M.A. thesis about funeral celebrations in Asante and is currently working on a Ph.D. project on mass media and new religious movements in Ghana.

\(^{1}\) One thousand cedis (¢1,000) were worth about US$0.60 in 1998. This article is based upon anthropological fieldwork in the district capital of Bekwai in the Asante Region from July 1998 to March 1999.
One could expect a traditional ritual, centred around the extended family and around beliefs about death and ancestorship, to reduce in importance under the influence of individualisation, urbanisation, the market economy, and Christianity. The opposite scenario is taking place in Ghana. Funerals are, more than any other ceremony, increasingly gaining in scale and importance. New customs have taken root and technological innovations like mortuaries, mass media, and electronic apparatus have enlarged possibilities and have given the funeral new dimensions. People’s willingness to spend on death has stimulated several small enterprises providing all kinds of goods and services for their funeral needs. Dealing with death has become a lucrative business.

The commercialisation of funerals has incited a hot public debate about the disproportionate cost of current funeral practices. Making money out of death evokes negative sentiments. ‘Much of contemporary Akan popular culture that has crept into funeral ceremonies can be viewed as commercial exploitation... The creeping commercialization is transforming bereavement into a largely monetized venture’ (Aboram-pah, 1999: 268). Money and death seem to be at odds. Money is an evil that dries out the emotions and compassionate values of bereavement. The profanity of money is felt to infringe on the respectfulness and sacredness of dealing with death. A proverb says *owuo mpe sika*, ‘death doesn’t like money’. It means that death cannot be bribed with money, but also hints at the perceived incompatibility of money and death.

This echoes a common critique of global ‘MacDonaldisation’, in which money is supposed to have the power to destroy social relationships, ritual practices, and cultural difference. The globalised money-economy, commercialisation, and consumerism are believed
to disrupt societies and uproot local cultures. Recent anthropological studies on cultural ways with money have challenged these taken-for-granted views of monetisation. The essays collected by Parry and Bloch (1989) question the assumption that money has a revolutionary and determinate impact on social and cultural life. They demonstrate the cultural variability of money and focus on the ways in which money is embedded and symbolically represented within existing world-views and social patterns. Guyer's collection (1995) draws attention to the ways in which the European monetary system articulated with, rather than wiped out, indigenous currencies in colonial West Africa. For Zelizer (2000), money is a cultural medium. She gives an overview of cross-disciplinary research on money which asserts that ‘people routine-ly use monetary transactions . . . to create, define, affirm, represent, challenge, or overturn their social ties’ (op. cit.: 10).

In Long Live the Dead! (De Witte, 2001), I have analysed Asante funerals as a field of strategic interaction, providing the ritual context for the creation of remembrance and identities, the elaboration of differences, the competition for status and power, and the negotiation of culture and social bonds and values. Within the framing narrative of respect for the dead and guiding the spirit to the next world, funerals are much about life. In this article I will look at how, in shaping death, people deal with money to negotiate values of life and relations between the living and show that in Asante the money economy and the social significance of the funeral tradition do not contravene, but rather reinforce each other. My argument is that we cannot understand a ‘traditional ritual’ like a funeral celebration, unless we move beyond the rather rigid opposition between tradition and modernity still prevalent in ritual studies, to acknowledge the open, flexible nature of tradition that makes it so vibrant in modern African life.

FAMILY, MONEY, AND THE ORGANISATION OF A FUNERAL

Asante funerals are the domain of the matrilineal kin group, the abusua, which forms the basic unit of Asante identity and social organisation. Although the abusua is losing ground to the nuclear family in many areas of life, it is still in control of the most important life event, the funeral. A death in the family is the occasion for members of the abusua who have dispersed all over Ghana and abroad to come home and share their emotions and the organisation and financing of the funeral. This strengthens and expresses the sense of communality and mutual dependence (see Vollbrecht, 1978: 327). Reciprocity is the basic principle governing the organisation of funerals within the family. Children organise a fitting funeral for their dead parent in recognition of the care they received from him or her during his or her lifetime. A big funeral also acknowledges a person’s contribution, financially or reproductively, to the abusua as a whole. Moreover, the funeral is the main event from which the abusua can gain prestige as a family and therefore funerals have also become large public displays where families
show off wealth and unity in a competition for status. The funeral as a source of family standing seems to grow in importance rather than to decline.

Celebrating a funeral is a long process that starts from the moment of death, ends with the last celebration after one year, and incorporates several ceremonies and events. In the past, before the advent of mortuaries, communication and transport facilities, a person was buried shortly after death with little ado. It was at the occasion of the funeral rites much later that the whole family and many visitors came together for a big celebration. Nowadays, keeping the body in a mortuary, sometimes up to several months, allows a family to plan and raise funds for an elaborate celebration including ‘laying-in-state’ and burial. After the body has been conveyed to the mortuary, the family meets to plan a date for the funeral. After one week (\textit{naawetwe da}) the deceased is commemorated in the family house, sympathisers come to ‘greet’ the family, and the family continues preparing the funeral. Usually a Saturday is chosen, which is convenient for working people, and the ‘laying-in-state’, burial, funeral rites, and thanksgiving service are all combined in the same weekend. This allows relatives and friends who may have had to come from far away to participate in the whole sequence of events. If they stay overnight or even a few days, it is the family’s task to provide them with lodging and food. On Saturday from daybreak till around mid-morning a ‘laying-in-state’ ceremony (\textit{ahodae}) is held in the family house. After a burial service in church (\textit{owuas\textasciitilde re}), the body is brought in procession to the cemetery where it is interred (\textit{afunsie}). The ‘final funeral rites’ (\textit{ayie} \textsuperscript{2} \textit{kese} or \textit{ayie pa}) take place in the afternoon at a public place. On Sunday there is a thanksgiving service in church (\textit{aseda as\textasciitilde re}), after which the funeral rites are continued at a public place or in the family house. In the week following the funeral, family members go and visit the sympathisers to thank them personally (\textit{k\textasciitilde aseda}). On the fortieth day another celebration (\textit{adaduanan}) is held and an heir is chosen. The one-year celebration (\textit{afehyiada}) is the last celebration whereby a large number of people come together and is often the occasion for unveiling the tomb.

Funeral costs, of course, differ with how elaborate the family wants the funeral to be, and thus depend upon the social esteem of the deceased and the financial resources of the family. An average funeral cost about 3 million cedis at the time of my stay (then \$1,800), an elaborate one about 10 million. Planning and organising a funeral is an intricate game of accountancy, as one woman told me: ‘When you organise a funeral you always have to calculate how many people will come and contribute. If you don’t estimate it well, you will incur a debt.’ To organise the funeral individual family members contribute something to start with, usually a few hundred thousand cedis per person. Some

\textsuperscript{2} The word \textit{ayie} is used both to refer to the main, public funeral rites as well as to all the ceremonies and practices and the general state of mourning following a death. To specify the main funeral rites, the word \textit{kese} (‘big’) or \textit{pa} (‘proper’) may be added.
specific tasks and payments are the responsibility of specific persons or groups, while other items are collective abusua business and are divided among the members. During the funeral rites visitors bring money donations to ‘help them mourn their loved one’. On Monday morning after the funeral, the family will ‘sit down together to calculate everything and share the debt’. All expenses are totalled up and the ‘income’ from donations is subtracted. The remaining debt or profit is shared among the family members.

Who is counted among the ‘family members’, however, is far from self-evident, and who has to contribute how much is subject to much negotiation and conflict. Often distant relatives staying abroad are suddenly included in the category ‘children’ or ‘chief mourners’ and expected to contribute huge sums, not because they are really so closely related to the deceased, but because they are thought to be rich. Refusing this may cause major trouble in the family, which nobody wants to answer for. Contributing to a family funeral, then, requires strategic negotiation. How to share the funeral debt (ayie ase ka) and how to share the inheritance are two ‘hot issues’ which are closely related. Family membership is widely recognised as a legitimate basis for making claims to family property, but because kinship is negotiable, access to property is just as subject to negotiation and contest. It is usually accepted that those who share in the debt are entitled to part of the inheritance (Arhin, 1994). Funerals are so important then, because ‘in coming together to honor the dead and share funeral expenses, people assert claims to family membership and the right to share in the enjoyment of family property’ (Berry, 2001: 111). A funeral debt binds the abusua together. This explains the general notion that there should be a debt after a funeral. Even if donations have covered or exceeded the expenses, people will say that there was a debt. The real financial figures are not to be disclosed outside the family. Not surprisingly, this secrecy about money gives rise to rumours about families making money out of a funeral and using the dead to get rich. It is unclear whether big funerals can really be so profitable. But officially, a funeral means a debt.

And the larger the debt, the better the funeral. More than the last expression of care and respect for the deceased, the funeral has become a show of family wealth and self-congratulation. The family house, the symbol of family property, is freshly painted and repaired and equipped with electricity, new curtains, and other decorations. Displaying the body in an elaborate fashion and organising a spectacular celebration, not only testifies to the wealth of the family, but also to their willingness to spend it on a great funeral for their deceased relative. Keeping the corpse in the mortuary for a long time, hiring an undertaker to decorate the body, or paying a photographer or video maker to record the whole scene, all add to the costs involved and—since people know the prices of such services—to the prestige of the family. It seems to be family status which is at stake rather than the status of the deceased (see Van der Geest, 2000). ‘Respect for the dead’ is the framing narrative families
use to celebrate their own excellence. In this, however, a family depends also upon others, that is, on their ‘wealth in people’.

FUNERAL EXCHANGES OF WEALTH AND MONEY

Several gift-giving rituals at funerals emphasise the symbolic role of family wealth and the interdependence of families and of community members. An impressive part of many funerals is a spectacular show called *adosoa* or *adekyeredee*, the presentation of gifts to the bereaved family by the ‘in-laws’ to show their sympathy and sorrow. A group of women carry a train of items on their heads and walk around to show it to the public, often accompanied by drummers and a dancer. One woman announces the gifts and the givers through the microphone. The givers are the families of the widow(er) and of the spouses of the children, i.e. families connected through marriage. The items they present may include bottles of imported spirits, crates of soft drinks and beer, different types of cloth, pillows, mats, traditional leather sandals (*ahenema*), a ‘decorated sheep’ (wearing a red ribbon around his neck), piles of bank notes, imported consumer goods (such as tins of milk, soap, shampoo, perfumes, tinned foodstuffs, and biscuits), and maybe some imported luxury articles (such as whisky glasses or handkerchiefs in kitsch cases). Everything is presented on shiny trays and bowls, decorated with ribbons and foil. A special gift sometimes included is a huge golden *awisiadɔ* (‘orphan’s necklace’) which is publicly presented to the deceased’s children by their spouses as a sign of consolation.

![Figure 2: Presentation of burial gifts (Photo: Marleen de Witte)](image-url)
Mostly, the articles presented are hired to make a display for the occasion (see below).

Interestingly, the bottles of schnapps, whisky, gin, or cognac are referred to as *nsa fufuo* (‘palm wine’) even though the show bottles may contain a mixture of water and coffee. It is thus not so much the use of the actual article that matters, but the article as an expression and confirmation of a relationship. *Nsaa fufuo* symbolises the bond between families, and the type of *nsa fufuo* (expensive cognacs and whiskys, moderately priced schnapps, or cheap real palm wine) shows how this relation is valued. The aim is to make a ‘fine funeral’ and the part of the in-laws is crucial: an *abusua* depends upon its in-laws to see their deceased member off in a great way. This marriage bond between two families persists after one of the partners dies. At many funerals, I saw families of long-deceased husbands or wives presenting gifts as an in-law family, not as individuals. The gift and the acceptance of it by expressing gratitude are public statements that both parties still consider the relationship meaningful. Of course, the *adosoa* show is a source of prestige for both families and an arena for competition between families. The amount and the quality of the items attest to the esteem of the deceased and of both families.

Rattray (1927) gives a detailed account of the donations each party should bring as a contribution to the funeral. He states that all contributions by people outside the *abusua* (the widow[er] and, in the case of a man, the children, the in-laws, friends, etc.) come under the category of *nsa*, ‘drink’.

The expenses in connection with a funeral, for which the family primarily is responsible, are known in Ashanti as *ayi asi ‘ka*, i.e. funeral debts which bind or hold. Voluntary contributions towards these expenses made by strangers, as an act of friendship or courtesy, are called *nsa*. They are kept separate and distinct and do not in any way make the donors liable for funeral expenses, for the debts of the deceased, or conversely give a claim to share in any surplus of the estate. The contributions, even where more or less obligatory, of the spouse and the children and grandchildren (i.e. in case where the deceased is a man) also come under the category of *nsa*’. [Rattray, 1927: 155\-156]

The term *nsa* for the money given at funerals echoes the ancient custom of visitors bringing pots of palm wine as a contribution to the funeral to be used in pouring libation and shared among the mourners. Nowadays, sympathisers donate money instead of palm wine (although bottled beer, schnapps or minerals may be added), but this donation is still called *nsa*. Today *nsa* still marks the boundary between inside and outside the *abusua* and points to the different kinds of money involved in organising a funeral. When I proposed to make a contribution to my adopted mother’s uncle’s funeral, she said I should buy special funeral cloth (*brisie*) for her mother. I should not give money, because I was not just a visitor. The custom is that the grandchildren and the husbands of the daughters buy cloth. By asking for cloth instead of money, my ‘mother’ involved me in her uncle’s funeral as a relative and not as a
sympathiser and thus claimed a family relationship with me. The money I used to buy the brisie cloth was clearly a different kind of money than the money given by 'strangers'.

With visitors' nsa donations to the bereaved family, the community not only shares in the grief, but also bears part of the financial burden of death. The act of giving money (bo nsa), usually a few thousand cedis per person, is a major happening at any funeral. At the funeral grounds a donation table and box are put down, where one man collects the

![Figure 3](image3.jpg)  
**Figure 3** Donation table at the funeral grounds (Photo: Marleen de Witte)

![Figure 4](image4.jpg)  
**Figure 4** Donation receipt (Photo: Marleen de Witte)
money and counts it, while another accurately writes down the names and donations in a note book. A third one writes out receipts, sometimes with a picture of the deceased on it, for the givers, so that both parties have a record of the amount of the donation in black and white. When the giver has gone back to his/her seat, a woman announces the person’s name and the donation through a public address system and a group of female family members go to thank him/her. Giving money in Ghana is nothing like the taboo-like affair it is in the Netherlands, where giving money as a present is already a bit suspect and banknotes should always be presented in a sealed envelope. In Ghana it is exactly the public nature of money giving that makes it meaningful (see Van der Geest, 1997).

Visiting funerals and making a ‘voluntary yet obligatory’ donation are based on reciprocity, both long-term and short-term. The amount people choose to give often depends upon the quality of the drinks and maybe snacks they get. When I asked my friend at one particular funeral how much we should donate, she said, ‘Well, the meat pie and the chips may have been 1,000, the coke 600, so we will add some and donate 5,000 together.’ At another funeral, she did not take a drink when offered one, because she was not going to donate. But as the visitors weigh the drinks against the donations, so do the family members. Usually, while serving the guests, they keep note of who drinks what and this may be compared to the donation receipt book when they make up the balance later. At the moment itself, explicitly going to thank the giver is a public acknowledgement of the donation and of the obligation to make a return gift on a future occasion. Someone who never attends and contributes to any funeral, then, will be blamed for lack of respect and cannot count on a high number of visitors at his/her own funeral and this is not a very good prospect. Fulfilling social obligations and expectations to ensure the success of one’s own or one’s relative’s future funeral is therefore an important motive for attending funerals in the community. Funerals, as the primary social events, are about creating, maintaining, and strengthening relationships. As Arhin (1994: 318) puts it: ‘The public aspects of funeral rites are a substitute for the parties of business men.’

In a society where many things in life are organised through informal networks, it is not surprising that investment in social relations is high. Money is the social binding agent in reciprocal relationships. Money that circulates is not only the glue that binds two people—the donor and the recipient—but the whole community. By publicly giving money one takes part in the system of money circulation and so legitimises one’s place in the community. During my fieldwork in Bekwai, my ‘grandmother’ was very fond of boasting about her white granddaughter. Whenever a visitor would not believe that I came from Bekwai, she would defend her claim by saying, ‘Sure she is from here, she goes to every funeral to donate money’ (firi ha ampa, akɔ ayie biara akɔbo nsa). Van Dijk (2000) argues that in the Ghanaian community in The Hague it is through the circulation of money that one’s own identity is most strongly expressed, especially at funerals.
In the Ghanaian diaspora, these celebrations have developed into true investments aimed at making profit to be sent to Ghana to build a house or support family. The number of visitors may rise to 1,500 and, there too, a crucial element is their donations, which are written down and announced to the public. Gifts range from £50 to £500 per person and the entire proceeds may amount to £50,000 before the deduction of expenses. Such financial gifts work, just as they do in Ghana, as social glue in the community, but in the European context, this has an additional significance. Social ties are forged with these money gifts, which—being an essential element—make the celebrations hardly accessible to outsiders and are a frame for emphasising the Ghanaian identity in a foreign society.

The use of money in the organisation and celebration of funerals, then, is strongly linked to social relations and group identities. Different kinds or categories of money relate to different relationships and identities. The money used for the funeral cost (ayie use ka) determines who belongs to the abusua. The money in-laws use to buy or hire nsa fufuo and adosoa gifts expresses and maintains marriage bonds between families. And the nsa money visitors give as a contribution identifies them as outside the abusua, but inside the community.

THE COMMERCIALISATION OF DEATH

A development that has significantly altered the way funerals are celebrated in Ghana is the rise of a whole array of local entrepreneurs who have set up various small businesses engaging in funeral celebrations. With a lot of people willing to spend more and more money on grand funerals, the funeral business is booming. While in ‘the olden days’ everything about a funeral was done by the family or other close relations, nowadays more and more parts of the funeral are contracted out to professionals. Instead of family and community members performing certain tasks like bathing and clothing the corpse, digging the grave, or carrying the coffin, such tasks are now done by ‘strangers’ who specialise in those tasks and make it their job.

Arhin (1994) describes the commercialisation of funerals as a result of social changes like urbanisation, migration, expanded transport and communication systems, the public health sector and changes in religious belief. ‘The cumulative effect of these changes is that “the great transformation”, the installation of money at the centre of social relations, proceeds at an increasing pace, so that funeral rites have become

---

3 At the introduction of the single European currency, the official conversion rate was €1 to £2.23071, making £1 just over €0.45.

4 ‘The olden days’ (tete) is a notion held by local people. Sometimes it is explained as ‘before the white man came’. When I use the term, I do not mean to suggest a period in which everything was stable and consistent, some kind of ‘bottom line’, after which things started changing. It rather refers to people’s experience that at an earlier (unspecified) point in history things were done differently from the way they are done today.
opportunities for money-making' (op. cit.: 313). Although the growth of
the funeral industry should be understood against the background of the
evolution of a money economy emphasising marketing, paid services,
and paid labour and opening new ways to the acquisition of cash and
people’s possibility to purchase, Arhin’s concept of transformation is
too static. He places the ‘essentials of funeral rites’, based on Rattray’s
descriptions, in the past and takes these as a point of departure. This
‘essence’ is then changed by a ‘modernity’ that comes exclusively from
outside. The idea of money as a ‘great transformer’ suggests a total
switch from a ‘traditional’ non-monetary economic system based on
reciprocity to a ‘Western’ system of money-relations. McCaskie (1983,
1995) has shown that also in pre-colonial Asante money played a key
role in the social-cultural system. Moreover, nowadays the exchange
mechanism of reciprocity is still very important, especially in organising
funerals. Many tasks are done, without any payment, on the basis of
social relationships. And when services or products for a funeral are
bought, this happens within social patterns of responsibilities. Con-
tracting out a funeral is not centralised as it is in the West, whereby the
whole thing is organised by the undertaker and one single bill (including
the coffin, the cake and the cemetery fees) is presented to the family
representative. In Ghana parts of the funeral are contracted out sepa-
rately, with different people being responsible for different tasks and
payments. The consumption of funeral products and services does not
mean that the local system of organisation is destroyed and replaced
by a globalised commercial system. Rather, commercial practices are incorporated in the local habitus. The assumption of a ‘great transformation’ would blind us to the culturally specific ways in which people make use of money exchanges, commodities and paid services in the context of death.

Parry and Bloch (1989) argue in their introduction that what explains people’s cultural ways with money is not a difference between (Western and non-Western) cultures, nor between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, but the coexistence of two separate, but related, transactional orders within a society. They distinguish between a cycle of short-term exchange, the domain of individual—often acquisitive—activity and competition, and a cycle of long-term exchanges concerned with reproduction of the social and cosmic order. What makes the two organically essential to each other is the relation between the individual human life and a symbolically constructed image of the social and cosmic order (see also Bloch and Parry, 1982). An individual’s death is the occasion for the re-negotiation of society and culture. I will describe the services in the Ghanaian funeral industry and show that with the money, commodities and paid services that people use to reconstruct a dead person’s life and create their own personality and status, they at the same time recreate social relations and cultural values.


Soon after death, the body is brought to the mortuary, or the ‘fridge’ in popular speech, which is usually attached to a hospital. Storage fees are high and usually rise with time, so that some people try to move their dead relative every week. A columnist in The Mirror comments:

Much of traditional Ghana spends weeks and months planning how to get rid of their ‘stiffs’ ... On average we love to freeze our dearly departed for a month or two before we consider them ready to go six-foot deep. [Hospital authorities] have devised a punitive pricing system meant to hit us were it hurts—the pocket, forgetting that in death, no expense is too much. Mortuary accommodation rates rival circle hotel prices: first week, $1,000 a day; second week, $5,000 per day and third week, $10,000 per day ... For the average month-long freeze period for the Ghanaian stiff we seem to think necessary in order to accord our proper respects, the price comes to $182,000 in mortuary fees alone. For the seven-months-long frozen chief, the mortuary bill alone must have been a staggering $7 million. [Gadzekpo, 1995]

So much value is put on planning an elaborate celebration and having the body present that people are willing to spend huge sums on preserving their ‘stiffs’. Moreover, keeping a body in the ‘fridge’ for a long time adds to the prestige of the funeral and the status of the deceased and his/her family, since people know mortuary prices.
Asante Funerals

As soon as the date of the funeral is set, it will be announced to the public by various media. Half of the Asante weekly *The Pioneer* is filled with obituaries and memorials with photographs of the deceased. Also in the national dailies around eight funeral announcements appear every day. Newspapers have made it possible to give wide publicity to the deceased’s achievements in terms of culturally accepted criteria of success. The advertised death has gained a prominent place in the way death is incorporated in the process of shaping modern identities. A typical obituary starts with a list of names, titles and positions of the people who announce the death, followed by the name and age of the deceased and the date and place of death. When the person occupied an honourable position, his/her occupation may also be stated. After the funeral arrangements stating dates and places of the various events, another long list of names mentions the widow(er), children, brothers and sisters, cousins, nephews and nieces, (great-)grandchildren, in-laws, and ‘chief mourners’. The last are a group of influential people (related or not), like chiefs and town elders, family heads, church pastors and officials, who associate themselves with the funeral, whether they will be actually present or not. This list also states occupations, companies and places of sojourn of the relatives, with emphasis on those who stay abroad or have high positions with big companies. All this enhances the social status of the deceased.

It is mostly the elite who use the national dailies in this way. Among the advertised dead are strikingly many ministers, managing directors, officers, chiefs and queen mothers. Advertising death is advertising self and family. In obituaries and memorials, people highlight Western education by using quotes from English literature, and Christianity by using bible quotations, references to God and social ties with pastors. Further, job careers, upward mobility, social networks and migration are publicised. These are the symbols of success, needed in the construction of selfhood in modern society. These are both individualistic criteria and values of family and accumulation of people. Reading the obituaries one can get an idea of how promising the upcoming funerals are, in terms of entertainment and interesting guests. Funerals that promise to be exciting—the funerals of rich and important persons—will attract crowds of people expecting to be well entertained and catered for. The obituary in that way acts as a marketing strategy, attracting people—and their donations—to an entertainment event. The use of radio, and in the future maybe television, to advertise funerals has the same effect. Wendl (1998) writes that a television entrepreneur in Accra is currently preparing the first ‘Funeral Channel’ in the world. It will, interrupted by commercial breaks and at very high prices, bring about the exclusivity of elite funerals. ‘This marks the beginning of a new era of televised necrology, and it is to be expected that the feedback effect of the media will further add to the potlach-like character of Ghanaian funeral celebrations’ (*op. cit.*: 49, original in German, translation MdW).
While in the past corpses were carried to the place of burial on the heads or shoulders of a few people, nowadays the transportation of dead bodies gives car owners and drivers the opportunity to make some extra cash. But now that transport has become (almost) generally available, the actual vehicle used in conveying the corpse has become a status symbol rather than a practical mode of transportation. For most people, having to transport their dead by (cheap) public transport would be a disgrace. They prefer to pay high prices to hire an ambulance or a pick-up truck to convey their dead relative from the mortuary to the home and, more importantly, from the home to the cemetery in a public procession. Transport owners exploit this concern with public image and can ask as much as 200,000. An advertisement in a Ghanaian daily for hearse rentals stated ‘American Cadillac hearse; Thursday rental 90,000 per day; Fri & Sat rentals 110,000 a day’ (Yeboah-Afari, 1997: 611).

‘LAYING-IN-STATE’:
THE BODY DECORATOR, THE COFFIN, AND THE VIDEO MAN

One of the ‘highlights’ of a funeral is the ‘laying-in-state’ ceremony, the display of the dead body in a decorated room or alcove, which many houses have especially for this purpose. Often the whole house is painted and provided with new lace curtains. Electricity may be connected for the occasion or a generator is hired to provide power for light and music. Ironically, a freshly painted house with bright lights is often a
sign of death. The walls and the ceiling of the display room are covered with lace and kente. Plastic flowers and plants, framed portrait pictures of the deceased, religious pictures, and wreaths decorate the room. In the middle, the deceased lies in a shiny golden bed, gorgeously dressed and adorned. Mourners walk around the bed to look at the corpse, cry and wail, pray or sing hymns. As the dead body is at the centre of public attention and evaluation, it should be ‘very nice’. Laying a dead person out—for the ‘laying-in-state’—is transforming the body into a ‘showpiece’, an image of beauty and good life.

In the olden days the preparation and decoration were done by elderly women in the family. Nowadays, especially in towns and cities, it is very common to have this job done by professional, specialised people who call themselves ‘funeral undertakers’, ‘morticians’, or ‘body decorators’. They do not organise and direct the whole funeral as do their European colleagues, but primarily take care of the presentation of the body. Usually they bring all the materials needed. Some ‘funeral undertakers’ also engage in additional services such as the sale of coffins, wreaths, gowns or suits. Auntie Amoanimae, an experienced ‘body decorator’ in Kumasi, told me about her work.

I started my work as a funeral undertaker fifteen years ago. By then I didn’t have so many things, so I had to rent all the things I used in decorating a body, so that there wasn’t much left from what I earned. Little by little I bought my own things and now I have everything I need. Whenever I lay a body in state, I use only my own things, not the things the family may have. Also the jewellery I use is my own. It may be that the family has not shined theirs, so I can’t use it. Usually I ask the family to get the body from the fridge three days in advance, so that the block can defrost. Then with a bit of exercise I can move the limbs so that I can clothe the body. Common people I usually lay in state like a bride or a bridegroom, in a white wedding dress or a suit. I also have to provide something to drive away the scent. And I have to decorate the room with kente and lace, and flowers in every corner. The only thing I don’t have is a bed. There are so many types of beds and every time people want a new type. It's fashion. When the body has been buried we leave the decorations and the things for another day, for people to come and look at it. On Monday I come to get my things. For the decoration of a paramount chief I ask ₦1 million, for a normal person ₦250,000 to ₦300,000. The price is always discussed with the family and depends on how they want it. If it’s family of friend, then I ask only small small money. Usually the family members don’t participate in laying the body in state and decorating it. They leave everything to me. Often I do it together with my son. The family comes to look at it to see if they are satisfied before the people come. The body should be presentable. That’s it. Chiefs or queen mothers or normal people, anything they ask me, I will like it, because it brings me money.

Hiring a ‘body decorator’ is considered the responsibility of the children of the deceased. Apart from the price agreed upon, they also have to provide him/her with drinks. In accordance with Akan custom, the people dealing with the body should be paid in nsa (‘drink’). This is related to the ritual potency of alcohol in transforming the deceased into
a spirit (Akyeampong, 1996: 39). Now that this task is commercialised, cash payment is the rule, but this is often supplemented with the customary drinks or part of the money is called *nsa*.

The children also have to buy the coffin. Kumasi is the centre of the coffin business, where many carpenters specialise in coffin making. Rows of coffins are displayed along the roadside, the workshop located just behind. An average coffin costs between GH250,000 and GH400,000; a classy one between GH600,000 and GH1 million, a year’s salary for some people. Some are quite simple, made of naturally varnished wood with a few small ornaments. Others are painted white or light blue and elaborately decorated with ‘golden’ handles and ornaments, plastic flowers, and glass windows in the sides or in the lid. The inside is lined with white satin and lace. The latest innovation now becoming fashionable is a folding coffin that converts into a bier.

With the production of beautiful fancy coffins in Ghana, but even more so with the import of luxury coffins from Europe or America, the practice of putting coffins on display at the courtyard of the family house during the ‘laying-in-state’ ceremony has taken root. The coffin is pre-eminently what the children can gain prestige from, because whereas the funeral as a whole is the *abusua*’s business and prestige, it is (in the case of a man) the children’s responsibility to provide the coffin. As Arhin and Amissah (1981: 179) state, ‘the coffin and other burial objects from the bereaved children are evidence of the fulfilment by a man of the obligations [to provide education for his children] and a testimony to his standing as a man, or of his “status”’. So since ‘the coffin is a special symbol of the father–child bond, it is the status of the children, more than that of anyone else involved, which is, as it were, on trial; and the children will make every effort to furnish their dead father’s *abusua* with a coffin that everyone will consider appropriate for his dignity’ (Chukwukere, 1981: 65). The coffin thus has become essential in the game of status and esteem.

Amidst the guests and around the dead body, photographers or video men do their work. Wendl (1998) has described how the originally colonial studio photography was locally appropriated to shape a ‘culture of remembrance’ and developed from an exclusivity of the urban elite to a widespread popular practice of self-immortalisation, culminating in the abundant use of photographs at a person’s funeral, framed and displayed, printed on funeral posters, programmes, T-shirts and donation receipts, or pinned on mourners’ clothes. While ‘laying-in-state’, a person is photographed or filmed for the last time. A photographer in the film *Future Remembrance* (Wendl and du Plessis, 1998) explains:

> [the relatives] will love to stand by the bedside just to have a photograph to prove how the body was well decorated. This serves as a memory. We in

---

5 A coastal trend in coffins are the internationally famous ‘fantasy coffins’ in the shape of an aspect of the deceased’s life (Secretan, 1995; Beckwith, 1994). In Asante, however such coffins are rare.
our culture, we normally take interest in the dead person, more than the live ones. So when someone dies, people try to put up their maximum. As for future remembrance.

Such post-mortem pictures fix the image of the displayed corpse, the image of beauty, success, and good life projected on the body of the deceased. Many Ghanaian photographers have taken the opportunity to take snapshots at funerals and other celebrations to earn a living. Since the early nineties it seems that video is catching up with photography in popularity and many of them are now combining photography with video making. Funeral videos focus first of all on the guests, the wailing and the tears, on the decorations of the room and the body, and on the coffin. Special effects, like mixing shots, are used to make the video more dramatic. A video man makes as many copies as the family has asked for, but if the video is very powerful, orders for more copies may follow. Such videos are first of all meant to be sent to relatives and friends abroad who were not able to attend the funeral and form part of the transnationalisation of Ghanaian funerals. But family members also keep them as a memory, to look at once in a while, to show to visitors or during later celebrations.

**FINAL FUNERAL RITES: SEATING, ‘PARTY SERVICE’, MUSIC, AND GIFTS**

The ‘final funeral rites’ are usually celebrated on a Saturday afternoon at a public place like a square, a park, or an open space in front of a bar or between the houses. When the place belongs to a bar or an institution, rent should be paid. To provide shady seating for the numerous funeral guests, people hire chairs and canopies from local entrepreneurs, often bar owners, and arrange them in a large quadrangle at the funeral grounds. In any context, a seat is an essential sign of welcome in the Asante tradition of hospitality. ‘Akonnuawɔ ho’ (‘there is a seat’) is the first thing said when one receives a visitor. As a funeral is the utmost occasion to receive guests in one’s hometown and family, the importance of seating is great. This holds for the number of seats, as being short of seats would be a disgrace, but also, not surprisingly, for the type of furniture hired, this being an indication of the status of the deceased and the family. There is a big difference in social esteem between the common wooden folding chairs, made by local carpenters and often quite uncomfortable, and plastic imported chairs, usually hired from Kumasi. In small villages canopies are often made of bamboo and palm leaves. In Bekwai this is considered bush-like and not done. There canopies of metal frames and dark blue cotton cloth are used. From Kumasi, however, one can get really nice canopies with ‘roofs’ of a taut silvery material, heat-resistant and never leaking. Of course, prices also vary considerably between the various types of furniture.

Just as guests are accorded a seat, they are also served at funerals. In the first instance this entails drinks, mostly soft drinks, but despite the Asante tradition of fasting in times of bereavement, it is becoming common, mainly in the cities, to provide funeral visitors not only with
drinks, but also with snacks or meals. Arhin (1994: 316) attributes this trend to other ethnic groups when he states that ‘under the influence of the Ga and Fante citizens of Accra, Cape Coast and Kumasi, meals, as rich as possible, have replaced the erstwhile Asante fast’. The food to be distributed among the guests may be cooked by women in the family or friends, but this job can now also be contracted out to specialised catering services, also called ‘party service’. Such enterprises provide snacks like meat pies, fried chicken, spring rolls or plantain chips and peanuts, or, if required, full meals of rice and meat. It comes in individual portions in disposable containers or paper bags, sometimes with a disposable fork and a paper napkin, which is a very Western way of serving food and contrasts sharply with the Asante way of eating. Eating with the (right) hand from a common bowl, before and after which the hands are washed with water, is still preferred by many people. Moreover, in Asante it is a taboo to eat in public. One should always eat inside and preferably in one’s own home. Most people, then, take their portions home to share with their families or eat later. Sometimes a secluded place like a school building away from the funeral grounds is appointed for funeral guests to eat their food, even if only a few crisps, and have their drinks in private. The new trend of serving food at funerals has evoked the criticism that people are rushing for food as soon as it is distributed, instead of mourning with the family. Another problem mentioned by some was that when people expect to be served food, not serving food will be a public sign of poverty and thus a disgrace. And of course, not everybody can afford a catering service.

Another item in the evaluation of a funeral is the music, as a funeral without any type of live music is not considered a good funeral. There should always be at least one group performing traditional drumming, *nnwomkorg* songs, popular highlife, or gospel music, but preferably two or even three. They have to provide the best entertainment possible, but also to create a mournful atmosphere. Mourners do not just sit down and watch the performance, but get up, either alone or in small groups, to dance and wail to the music. Music can evoke tears and dance is a way of expressing emotions and a source of consolation. Moreover, music and dance are a way of paying respect to the deceased, of seeing the dead off. For many musical groups, then, funerals are major performance occasions and a source of revenue. In the past the members of a (traditional) music band were, like ‘body decorators’, rarely paid in money for their performance at funerals (Aborampah, 1999: 267). Now they are hired for a fee agreed in advance, but usually they are also given (and request) plenty of drinks.

The choice of music is often influenced by a family’s social network, which may include musicians. But a family may also choose to hire a particular type of music band for a funeral that they consider fit for the deceased. For active Christians, a band or choir is often organised through the church. At funerals of very old people, traditional drumming and singing groups are more frequent than popular bands, as people then often prefer to ‘make the funeral traditional’ (*yen ayie te se atetesemdees*). Interestingly, ‘tradition’ (*atetesem*, ‘matters of the olden days’) then
becomes like a thing people may deem appropriate for a certain occasion, whether to pay respect to the deceased or to provide entertainment, and choose to hire. One of Miescher’s informants comments on the recent innovation of hiring ‘cultural dance companies’ to make a funeral look more ‘traditional’:

When last year somebody died, the celebration included the people from the Kumasi Cultural Centre, this is something quite strange to everybody. Because we had never, never this . . . That was the first time in my life I have seen these people at a funeral, which is a new thing . . . [Miescher, 1997: 539–540]

This entails a ‘reinvention’ of traditional culture as a fixed body of, among other things, music and dance. But also what people perceive as ‘tradition’ is subject to change. In a Twi publication on *nnwomkor3*, itself a way of canonising culture, Aning writes about the transformation of formerly exclusively female, ‘traditional’ *nnwomkor3* groups:

Nowadays in some big Asante towns like Kumasi or Mampong, people have founded *nnwomkor3* groups into which they have even accepted men. [Previously] if somebody among the people who frequently met to make music died, they could go and play at his/her funeral. As for today, the groups they have founded can use *nnwomkor3* to tour different people’s funerals in town and they can play at Christmas or at the various festivals in the country. [Aning, 1975: 9, original in Twi, translation by MdW]
Traditional music and dance, embodied by people who specialise in ‘culture’, so-called ‘cultural groups’, have thus become an integral part of the funeral business.

Highlife music is a very popular and widespread musical style and although highlife singers do not often perform live at funerals, they do play a big part in the funeral business. It is mainly through their numerous cassettes that highlife singers cater for the music market and for funerals. The DJ, a young man between twenty and thirty years old with a suitcase full of music tapes, is present at almost any funeral, and highlife songs blast from huge loudspeakers from morning to evening. Sitting behind his sound system, he almost incessantly plays songs, occasionally shouting into the microphone or responding to the public. Also in the bars where the funeral goers gather to drink and in the clubs where they go to dance after the funeral, highlife is played and people sing along loudly. Towards the evening, many funerals end in a small dance party at the funeral grounds. Funerals have become a form of entertainment. As funerals thus form an important market for highlife music, many songs are about death and the pain and misery it causes (see Van der Geest, 1980, 1984). Some are composed for a specific case and have gained wide popularity later. Others are about the general agony of death. Highlife songs on death provide the context for mourners to express their sorrow and help deal with the loss of a relative or friend. But it is not only songs about death that are played at funerals. Any song that is popular at the moment can be heard.

There are a few DJs and sound system providers in Bekwai. Yesu Mo Sounds\(^6\) is a shop selling all kinds of electrical parts, music cassettes and CDs. They do electrical repairs, but you can also book them for $80,000 to play music at funerals and other parties. With the rise of this kind of music provision, young people have an active part to play in funerals, whereas twenty years ago such entertainment was restricted to bars. Van der Geest (1999: 488) observed at funerals in Kwahu that:

Funerals, which always have been the preeminent occasion for the elders to ‘shine’, are being taken over by the younger generation. At present, enormous amplifiers spew out the sounds of highlife music, which have drowned the drums and dances of elders at the funeral ground. The traditional tasks of addressing the mourners and announcing their gifts are now carried out by a ‘jamboree’, a kind of disc jockey or entertainer, who mourns at funerals and makes jokes at wedding parties if you pay him. During funerals, the elders and their culture are literally blasted away by the technological and commercial advances of the new age. One may find them sitting quietly, watching the eclipse of their world.

Although in Bekwai I found that elders do still play an active and creative part in the performance of funerals, Van der Geest rightly points to the difference between the generations that is worked out at funerals. The younger, professional generation has indeed acquired an essential part

\(^6\) Yesu mo means ‘Well done, Jesus’.
to play that it did not have in the past. Music and entertainment in particular is an area of the funeral where relations between the elderly and the young are renegotiated.

Another piece of entertainment for funeral visitors is the traditional gift-giving ritual called adosoa. This has developed into a surprising business, namely the rental of the ‘gifts’ to the givers at considerable fees. At ‘King’s and Queen’s, Nana Abrafi Mansah Enterprise’, a shop near the king’s palace in Kumasi selling all kinds of royal regalia, one can hire a complete adosoa set at the cost of $150,000. The items are on display in the shop, all packed in golden pots. They include expensive cloths, nicely folded and decorated with ribbons, bottles wrapped in shiny coloured foil, and empty bottles of luxury import spirits such as Johnny Walker and Rémy Martin to be filled with a mixture of water and coffee to imitate the colour of whisky and cognac. They also have some awisiadg necklaces to be presented to the bereaved children, but these will add to the cost. The in-laws of a bereaved family can hire the ‘gifts’ for a day, after which they should be returned immediately. Together with the items Nana Abrafi Mansah provides a dancer to liven up the show. She has her picture in the shop: a young girl in a colourful piece of kente and traditionally adorned with necklaces, bracelets and anklets of gold and beads. She will dance to the rhythm of the drums that accompany the presentation of the gifts. All is intended to ‘make a fine show’.

Like the cultural groups one can hire to make a funeral traditional, adosoa is a similar ‘piece of culture’ available for funerals. But it is more than that. Since the show is bought by a particular group of people (the in-laws) and ceremonially presented to another particular group (the bereaved family), it reveals the interdependence of both groups, and shows how this relation is valued. The amount and the quality of the items, the beauty and skills of the dancer and the vigour of the drummers, attest to the esteem of the deceased, the family, and the in-laws. The fact that these things are just hired for the occasion does not at all devalue the presentation. In the arena where families compete for prestige, the more beautiful the show, the better.

A similar thing seems to happen to the culturally obligatory tears. In Kumasi it is becoming the fashion to hire mourners to come and cry at your funeral to set the mournful atmosphere required for a good funeral. Certain funeral undertakers mediate between bereaved families and groups of women who ‘know how to cry’, using the appropriate words, laments, gestures and body language to express the grief of others.

FUNERAL SOCIETIES AND FUNERAL LOANS

With the growth of all these small services and businesses engaging in death, funerals have become an extremely costly affair and for many people it has become attractive to join a funeral society. Funeral societies have come to play an important part in the financing of grand funerals, a
form of funeral insurance, whereby members contribute a fixed amount of money to a fund on a regular basis. This is then used to assist the individual members upon the death of a close relative or to assist the family of a member upon his/her death. But not everybody takes part in such a collective saving programme. When bereaved families don't have the money required for the funeral they intend to organise and have difficulties raising funds from well-to-do friends or acquaintances, some banks grant them ‘funeral loans’ to pay for the expenses, as Arhin (1994: 320) tells us:

The rural banks specialise in such loans. For example, the Nwabiagya Rural Bank at Bare-Kese, of whose board of directors I happen to be chairman, advances a maximum of 150,000 cedis (about £156) to a family for funeral rites on condition that the donations, nsa, are surrendered to the bank immediately after the funeral. The head of the family and another person are also required to stand as surety. Interest on the loan is 5 percent at the Nwabiagya Rural Bank.

With numerous businesses, an (informal) insurance system, ‘advertisement’, and banks involved, the Asante funeral obsession has grown into a proper economic field.

FUNERAL ECONOMICS DEBATED AND CURTAILED

The commercialisation of death has evoked criticism and a fierce discussion in the local media. It seems to be a tug-of-war between those who argue that funerals are contributing to the economy and those who say that funerals are only swallowing money badly needed for other purposes, such as the improvement of living conditions and health care. In a letter to The Mirror newspaper, Nana Annoh-Oprensem (1995) stresses the economic advantages of funerals: ‘Funerals make the economic wheel revolve—the breweries, the butchers, the foodstuff sellers, the transporters and others all benefit’. But Dedey (1995) answers: ‘I do not in any way believe in Nana’s proposed funeral economy . . . I have heard weird things in my time, but not economics that thrives on funerals’. Arhin (1994: 307) also argues that ‘contrary to popular impressions and to the views of the chiefs of Ashanti, the transformations in the rites support certain industries and stimulate new services’. He explains that ‘the increase in the quality and scale of funeral rites has stimulated the carpentry, brewing, distilling and paint trades, and has promoted such service industries as those of the mortician (a Ghanaian version of the undertaker), the suppliers of canopies and seats, and music and dance or cultural groups’ (op. cit.: 318) and concludes that ‘on balance, they are economically useful’ (ibid.). Many people, however, reject wasting money on grand funerals when there is no money for proper health care, basic nutrition, and children’s education. The Twi proverb abusua do funu, ‘the family loves a dead body’, implies criticism of this trend of spending more money on funerals than on care for the elderly and the sick and of taking a
death in the family as an opportunity to display family wealth, enhance family prestige, and even make money.

With this public debate, funerals have become a ‘social problem’, prompting authorities to regulate funeral celebrations to curb cost. Authorities in Asante have long been preoccupied with the way in which people bury and mourn their dead. In spite of a century of funeral regulation by chiefs (De Witte, 2001), funerals still seem to escape the boundaries that have been imposed. At the time of my fieldwork the Asante Regional House of Chiefs issued a very detailed regulation concerning all stages of a funeral, publicised in the regional weekly The Pioneer (11 September 1998). The new rules are extremely precise, pertaining to every small part of a funeral, from the mode of announcement and the length of time the body may be kept in the mortuary (four weeks) and displayed in the house (from dawn to mid-morning), to the type of cloth to be worn and the prices of particular items (coffin, burial cloth) and services (body decorator). The following, to give only a few examples, were abolished: serving drinks or food, organising a public wake, displaying the coffin, announcing donations to the public, hiring gifts, and having more than two music bands. The cost involved is clearly the major criterion behind the specific rules, but throughout ‘custom’ is used to legitimise the abolishment or prescription of certain practices.

In practice, although wakes are no longer held and ‘laying-in-state’ is generally limited to the morning, many of the other rules are frequently broken or manipulated. Drinks continue to be served at many funerals. If not, substitutes such as bags of ‘pure water’, sweets or small snacks have replaced the customary ‘minerals’. Receiving guests without serving them anything is so contrary to Asante norms that ways are found to bypass the ban on drinks. The prohibition of ‘decorating a corpse gorgeously with expensive materials’ is of course highly susceptible to manipulation, as criteria of ‘gorgeous’ are lacking. I have seen many corpses decorated with kente and other expensive cloth, elaborate gowns, precious beads and golden jewellery. The same goes for the one-week, fortieth day, and one-year celebrations, which should be ‘very simple’ or ‘limited to the deceased family and relations’. They can still be large public celebrations with lots of people—of course all ‘relations’ in one or another way—as well as drinks and drumming or other types of music. The rule concerning the announcement of donations is very frequently broken; not surprisingly, as here it is the public aspect of money that makes it meaningful.

When rules are broken, however, in practice no sanctions are imposed. Only customary punishment is applicable, meaning that people can be called before the council of elders and made to bring some bottles of schnapps, some money, or a sheep ‘to heal the breach’, but this is hardly implemented. I never came across anyone being punished; people breaking the rules also did not seem to fear any punishment or even reprimand. Most people knew about the new laws, although not in detail, and did acknowledge the need for such laws, but in practice they were not eager to comply. As long as cultural practices
are meaningful to the people, they continue to escape control from above, making it virtually impossible to restrict funeral celebrations in practice. The by-laws do have an important effect, however, as they give people an excuse for not following the funeral trend of ostentation, simply because this is prohibited by respected authorities. Paradoxically, the strict regulations introduce an element of choice. Whereas social pressure made it virtually impossible not to fulfil certain expectations, the funeral by-laws provide a way out.

SOCIAL MONEY AND MODERN LIFESTYLES

I have examined the ways in which Asante people deal with money in celebrating their funerals and in this process shape social relations and lifestyles. Monetisation is not something simply taken over from the West at the expense of local culture and social life. Neither do the monetary practices of Asante funerals present an exceptional case of resistance to the homogenising and destroying power of a globalised money system. On the contrary, it is exactly through money and commodification that funeral celebrations are expanding, social ties forged, and cultural performances stimulated, albeit in new ways. Asante funerals form a complex field of interaction, where 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.

Ghana's funeral business—like all economics, in my view—amounts to more than production and consumption on sheer economic terms of supply and demand. To recognise the 'diversity created by differential consumption of what had once been thought to be global and homogenising institutions' (Miller, 1995: 3), we have to look at money and consumption—of goods and of services—as a cultural practice. Asante people buy services and commodities to shape their funerals and in so doing, to stage an image of life. Appadurai (1996: 68) remarks that 'in many societies, important rites of passage have consumption markers'. In Asante funerals this is obvious, as key moments include the presentation of (consumer) goods by the in-laws, serving drinks and sometimes 'take-away food' to the sympathisers, and viewing the decorated corpse and display room. Such consumption practices are not mechanical exchanges following a fixed set of rules, but 'strategic interactions' (op. cit.: 69). People follow certain consumption strategies to attain specific individual or group ends, which have much to do with social ties, prestige and social pressure. The scale and public visibility of money and wealth at funerals constitute the social meanings of these rites of passage. The circulation and spending of money at Asante funerals do not just serve to symbolically mark the transition of the deceased from life to death, but have a strong social significance for the life of the living.

On several levels, money works as social glue. It affirms social relationships and creates group identities by determining inside and outside.
Different kinds of money are differently employed. The flexibility of the Akan kinship system and the tension between the abusua and the modern nuclear family mean that 'family' is not a given, but modifiable and negotiable. This happens at the occasion of death through the process of organisation of the funeral, the distribution of roles and tasks, the exchange of gifts and contributions, and matters of debt sharing and inheritance. Family membership is reaffirmed by contributing to the ayie ase ka, the funeral cost that binds the abusua and, consequently, sharing in the inheritance. As a proverb says, sika fre mogya, 'money calls blood', money induces kinship. The funeral money circulating within the family is private money, although the ways in which it is spent are public and visible to everybody. Information about the total cost of a funeral, individual members' contributions, the sharing of the funeral debt and the inheritance, and possible profit from the funeral is hard to get at and remains hidden, even secret, from people outside the family. Of course, this gives rise to speculation and gossip on this issue. The funeral money contributed from outside to the family, nsa, however, is publicly visible money. On the inter-family level, nsa and the goods bought or hired with it, are part of a public ceremony in which the items and amounts are announced one by one and affirm the interdependence of families related through marriage. Within the community, the circulation of money through regular donations, nsa, to funerals in the community and the public notification and bookkeeping thereof, establish a community identity by defining membership of community and reciprocal obligations. Different categories of money thus create different relationships.

Money is also an expression of lifestyles, of (old and new) cultural values and ideals. More than being an actual contribution to the receiver’s living needs, the money and goods donated at funerals add to the status of the giver, the receiver and the dead, because they publicly testify to the giver’s ability and willingness to buy and present them. It is visibility and show that matter. The things on display symbolise a lifestyle of consumption of (imported) goods many people aspire to and, as such, are a materialisation of what it means to be modern and successful. Hiring professionals at high cost is a sign of a lifestyle based on individual achievement and ability to purchase, a way of communicating one’s success in modern life. Conspicuous consumption and wasteful spending seem to have become the visual markers of social status. Funeral celebrations, being the main public events, are the best occasions to communicate these signs and establish one’s esteem.

Arhin (1995) argues that up to the colonial period money (gold dust) was a means for strengthening the community as a whole through redistribution. The colonial regime and its promotion of individualism reversed this. Money and consumption became a way of enhancing individual power. ‘Today, the rich, by virtue of conspicuous consumption in marital and funeral observances, tend to exercise more social power and “respect” than formal customary authority-holders’ (op. cit.: 107). I would argue, however, that the elaboration of consumption practices cannot be seen as a radical revision brought about by colonialism.
Consumption and money exchanges at funerals are not only a matter of showing individual power and status, but happen within existing patterns of social relations and obligations. Parry and Bloch's distinction (1989) between competitive short-term exchange and long-term exchange reproducing the social order can clarify the process. At Asante funerals the two things happen at the same time. In practices such as the adosoa show, the display and use of (imported) schnapps, or the purchase of a fancy coffin, people buy or hire goods in an (individual) competition for status. But they do this within a cultural pattern of exchange and social responsibilities, which reaffirms how people relate to each other. Following certain exchange strategies, they at the same time negotiate this order of relations.

Traditional values of family honour, respect, prestige, wealth accumulation, and generosity have taken on new forms with the emergence of modern ideals of a lifestyle of Western-inspired consumption. Where in the past status derived from the accumulation of wealth and its redistribution among family and other relations, success is now also measured by one's ability to spend. Public consumption at funerals, then, is a way of fulfilling desires that are identified with highly valued lifestyles, a visual and material realisation of the image of a good life. Purchase has certainly become a way of self-realisation and individual distinction (see Barber, 1995), but at funerals it is through the performance of group relations and identities, and traditionally accepted norms of communal sharing and respect for the dead, that this is communicated.

Far from destroying local culture and social life, commercial business is incorporated in the local habitus of social exchange. In the context of particular individuals and groups having responsibility for certain contributions or gifts, entrepreneurs in the funeral industry provide the symbols needed to meet cultural values of respect and reciprocity and to express lifestyles and ideals. Not only do these goods and services colour the picture people seek to create, the consumption of them is itself a sign of people's ability to make the necessary purchases for a modern and successful life. But 'tradition' is just as well recreated and incorporated in the funeral industry by people who hire themselves out to perform certain 'customary' funeral activities, such as drumming, presenting gifts or wailing. The commercialisation of Asante funerals is a long-term process of gradual and fluid transformation, which cannot be explained by an assumption of a Great Transformation, based on the opposition between tradition and modernity. The funeral practices here examined urge us to get beyond this very opposition, to realise that both 'tradition' and 'modernity' are locally constructed in contemporary cultural practice.

REFERENCES


This article examines the current commercialisation and expansion of Asante funeral celebrations in Ghana. Funerals have always been the main public social events in Asante, but the growing funeral business significantly alters the way death is celebrated. The article takes as a point of departure a view of death as a field of strategic interaction, providing the ritual context for the creation of remembrance and identities, the elaboration of differences, the competition for status and power, and the negotiation of culture and social bonds and values. Within the framing narrative of respect for the dead and guiding the spirit to the next world, funerals are much about life. The article describes how, in shaping death, people deal with money to negotiate values of life and relations between the living, and shows that, contrary to both popular belief and critique on global commercialisation, 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 social glue and as an expression of lifestyles, cultural values and ideals. It is argued that we cannot understand ‘traditional ritual’ unless we move beyond the rather rigid opposition between tradition and modernity still prevalent in ritual studies to acknowledge the open, flexible nature of tradition that makes it so vibrant in modern African life.

Résumé

Cet article examine la commercialisation et l’essor des célébrations funéraires achanti au Ghana. Les funérailles ont certes toujours constitué les principaux événements sociaux publics en Achanti, mais l’essor du marché du funéraire modifie considérablement la manière de célébrer la mort. L’article part de l’idée que la mort est un champ d’interaction stratégique fournissant le contexte rituel de création du souvenir et des identités, d’élaboration des différences,
de concurrence pour le prestige et le pouvoir, et de négociation de la culture et des liens et valeurs sociaux. Au sein du récit de respect pour le défunt et d'accompagnement guidé de l'esprit jusque dans l'au-delà, la vie est très présente dans les funérailles. L'article décrit comment, en déterminant la mort, les individus se servent de l'argent pour négocier les valeurs de la vie et les relations entre les vivants, et montre que, contrairement à de nombreuses idées reçues et aux critiques contre la mondialisation du commerce, l'économie monétaire et la dimension sociale de la tradition funéraire ne s'opposent pas en Achanti, mais se renforcent mutuellement. La célébration funéraire ne disparaît pas sous l'effet de la monétisation et ne constitue pas non plus une sorte de dernier rempart face à celle-ci. En effet, c'est précisément à travers l'argent et la marchandisation que les cérémonies funéraires se développent, que les liens sociaux se forgent et que les manifestations culturelles sont stimulées, quand bien même de manière différente. Dans les funérailles achanti, les individus se livrent à des pratiques de consommation et d'entreprise commerciale, ainsi qu'à des traditions et modèles d'échange indigènes, dans un processus de «bricolage culturel», et développent de nouveaux styles locaux de célébration de la mort dans lesquels l'argent vient jouer un rôle central de ciment social et d'expression de modes de vie, de valeurs culturelles et d'idéaux. L'article soutient que l'on ne peut comprendre le «rituel traditionnel» qu'à condition de dépasser l'opposition plutôt rigide entre tradition et modernité qui prévalait encore dans les études rituelles, pour reconnaître la nature ouverte et flexible de la tradition qui la rend si vivante dans l'Afrique moderne.