Transnational Migration and the Economy of Funerals: Changing Practices in Ghana

Valentina Mazzucato, Mirjam Kabki and Lothar Smith

ABSTRACT

Migrants are increasingly leading transnational lives, impacting the institutions that shape local economies both in their place of residence and in their home communities. One example of this is the institution of funerals in developing countries. Funerals are becoming multi-sited events as migrants from developing countries play important roles in the organization, financing and practice of funeral ceremonies in their home countries. Funerals thus give rise to flows of money, goods and people across national borders, ultimately affecting different economies around the world. This article uses a multi-sited research design to follow the flows associated with a funeral held in a village in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. Detailed data were collected simultaneously in four locations involved in the funeral, and a multiplier analysis was used to trace funeral spending in different locations and sectors. The analysis shows that funeral spending supports various economic sectors in Ghana and across the globe, reinforcing the nature of funerals as (partly) economic events, which should be included in economic analyses of remittances and migration. Funeral practices are modified in various ways to accommodate transnational elements. At the same time, funerals continue to act, even in a transnational context, as occasions for reaffirming ties and a sense of belonging; they form a way for home communities, both rural and urban, to keep migrants interested in them.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars of transnationalism argue that advances in information and communication technology, cheaper air travel, and the modern capitalist production relations of the past half century have given rise to new and increased flows of people, goods, money and ideas, which connect seemingly disparate locations of the globe (Glick Schiller et al., 1995; Portes, 1998; Vertovec, 1999). These flows result in qualitative changes in the way people organize their social lives (Foner, 1997) and produce social, economic and cultural processes that cross borders of nation-states. As such, transnationalism brings into question notions of space in which social, economic and cultural phenomena are assumed to overlap perfectly in one geographic area, usually a
Migrants are not immune from these changes. Increasingly, they lead transnational lives, which impact the institutions that shape local economies in their place of residence as well as in their home communities. One such institution impacted by transnational phenomena is funerals in developing countries. Funerals are frequently multi-sited events in which migrants overseas play important roles in the organization, financing, and carrying out of ceremonies. As a result, funeral practices are adapted in the home country to accommodate and include transnational elements. Furthermore, funerals are moments of intense exchange and redistribution of resources (time and money) within communities (Berry, 2001; Goody, 1962). At the transnational scale, this results in flows of goods, money and people that have an impact on different economies around the world.

Recent anthropological scholarship has described some of the transnational elements of funerals in countries such as Ghana, Bangladesh and India (Gardner, 2002; Nieuwenhuys, 2004; de Witte, 2001). These studies focus on the funeral ritual in a specific location and how practices have been affected by migration. While they point to the importance of remittances sent for funerals from overseas, questions still remain as to the economic value of these funeral remittances and how they affect the different locations implicated in funeral ceremonies. Some anthropologists have pointed to the economic importance of funerals (Arhin, 1994; de Witte, 2001), but quantitative analyses are largely missing.

Migration and development studies that take a quantitative approach to remittances generally ignore funeral remittances (Black et al., 2003; Russell, 1986; Taylor, 1999). This may be partially due to a ‘western’ bias not to consider funerals as also having an economic component: funerals are predominantly conceptualized as cultural rites and have thus been studied almost exclusively by anthropologists. The neglect may also be partially caused by the nature of funeral spending, which, as this article will show, is fragmented over time, space and individuals, making it difficult to collect quantitative funeral data with one-off questionnaires (Mazzucato et al., 2005).

This article brings together these two areas of study by focusing on the effects of international migration on the practice of funeral spending — how funeral remittances are spent, how spending is distributed across different geographical locations, and what role funeral spending by migrants plays in transnational relationships between migrants and their home communities. It presents a case study of a funeral held in the Ashanti Region of Ghana, where the transnationalization of funerals is an increasing and important

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1. The definition of institutions used in this article is similar to that of North (1990): they are the commonly held categories such as rules, laws, or norms of conduct that guide people’s actions and define the structure of economies.
phenomenon (de Witte, 2001). As such it is indicative of some of the trends occurring in funerals in many developing countries around the world. We study the funeral through a multi-sited research design by simultaneously collecting information from four different locations around the globe. To our knowledge, this has not been done before.

The article proceeds as follows. In the next section, the multi-sited research design and methods are explained. The case is then presented and placed within the broader context of Akan funerals. The following section then analyses detailed data on financial flows pertaining to the funeral and, more generally, to funeral remittances sent by Ghanaians in The Netherlands. There is also a discussion of the transnational elements of decisions which affected the way the funeral was ultimately performed. The final two sections examine the specific role of funerals in transnational social relationships, before drawing out the implications of our transnational research approach and findings for the study of funerals, and more broadly for the debates around migration and development.

**A TRANSNATIONAL RESEARCH DESIGN**

A number of authors have argued that transnational phenomena give rise to the need for multi-sited research (for example, Hannerz, 1998; Marcus, 1995; Stoller, 1997). This study is embedded within a larger research programme in which a team of researchers based in different locations connected by social networks, collected information about transnational phenomena simultaneously (Mazzucato, 2000). As such, it is one of the few multi-sited empirical studies to collect data from the different sites at the same time (Mazzucato, 2005a). Simultaneity gives the additional advantage of being able to follow flows of people, goods and money, and to observe their effects in the different locations in real time.

The research population was Ghanaian migrants in The Netherlands, and their respective social network members in Ghana. Two research projects were based where most migrants and network members were located: Amsterdam, Accra (capital of Ghana), Kumasi (capital of the Ashanti Region), and rural villages and towns in the Ashanti Region. Each researcher followed respondents in the four locations over a one-year period (July 2003 to

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2. The analysis of this funeral is part of a larger study on the effects of Ghanaian migrants’ transnational networks on values, knowledge, economic opportunities and means of social assistance, which ultimately impact the institutions that shape local economies at home and abroad. For more details see, www2.fmg.uva.nl/ghanatransnet.

3. Over 50 per cent of Ghanaians registered as living in The Netherlands live in Amsterdam (Choenni, 2002). However, the overall percentage is probably larger as most undocumented Ghanaians in The Netherlands are also thought to live in Amsterdam.

4. Historically, migrants from Ghana to Western destinations have been predominantly Akan (Jenkins, 1985; Nimako, 1993).
Figure 1. Genealogy of the Family of the Deceased.

Notes: Names in bold are those people whom we interviewed. Two of those whom we interviewed do not appear in the genealogy because they are more distantly related. Source: thematic interviews, 2003–2004

June 2004), using the same research methods, in order to collect simultaneous and comparable data for all members of the network.

For the case study of the funeral presented here, fourteen members of a matrilineal kinship group were followed: five in Accra, three in the rural Ashanti Region, two in Kumasi and four in Amsterdam. They were all in some way involved with the organization of the funeral (see Figure 1). The funeral was studied intensively in its three phases: the preparation, the carrying out, and the events following. This is empirically very difficult to do because of the variety of actors involved, the many sources from which money comes for a funeral, and because respondents do not easily share detailed financial information regarding funerals. We were able to gain access to this information because we had built up relationships of trust with the network members for almost a year prior to the funeral.

Data were collected through a transaction study in which transactions regarding the funeral were collected on a monthly basis for all fourteen members, before, during and after the funeral. We also participated in and

5. The names of people and of the village where the funeral took place are changed in order to protect their privacy.

6. Transactions are defined as communication (through telephone, post, audio/video cassettes, physical travel or computer), goods, money or services exchanged between two or more people.
observed the various meetings and ceremonies held in The Netherlands and in Ghana that led up to and comprised the funeral. Researchers communicated relevant information to the rest of the team in bi-weekly reports so as to enable each researcher to ask more detailed questions about things or events happening in their research locations. In this way we collected qualitative as well as quantitative data and were able to triangulate our findings.

Finally, information on this funeral is complemented by more general observations made during attendance at ten other funerals in rural, semi-urban and urban contexts in Ghana; attendance at one funeral in Amsterdam and viewing of the videotapes of two others; numerous observations from local assistants; and quantitative data on funeral remittances collected from twenty-nine Ghanaian migrants in The Netherlands. Based on these more general observations, we consider the transnational dynamics of this funeral to represent some general trends in Ghanaian funerals.

AKUA’S FUNERAL

The Akan are a matrilineal society. In the case of funerals, this means that the matriliny is responsible for the organization of a family member’s funeral and the allocation of the inheritance. Akua was fifty-two years old when she passed away in a hospital in Accra in November 2003, and was viewed as having lived a ‘successful’ life. She was a prosperous trader, a member of the village’s royal clan, had helped the first migrants from her matriliny to migrate overseas, and had financially supported various members of the matriliny. Funerals are among the most important ceremonies of Akan cultural and social life: Akua’s was no exception. To honour her successful life, members of her matriliny wanted to organize a grand funeral. Akwasi, the eldest uncle (mother’s brother) of the deceased and Kofi, the eldest brother, were the main organizers in Accra while Kate, the eldest sister, was the main organizer in Amsterdam. Bill, a member of the same clan as the deceased and also a linguist of the royal family, was the main organizer in the village (see Figure 1).

The village of Ayiase, where the funeral eventually took place, is remote: it does not have electricity and is 10 km from a main road. The small road connecting the village to the main road was only tarred in 2003. It is among the leading cocoa producing communities in the district, but apart from farming and small-scale trading there is not much employment. Therefore, many of the young people leave the village in search of work in cities like Kumasi and Accra, or migrate overseas. Ayiase has approximately 3,000 inhabitants (Ghana Statistical Service, 2002). An unofficial 2004 population

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7. Here and in the rest of the paper, ‘family’ refers to matrilineal family members.
8. A male and female member of her clan are the traditional village leaders.
count by one of the political leaders of the village indicated that seventy-three village members were residing abroad. Although this gives this fairly remote village considerable representation worldwide, it is within the norm for Ashanti villages (Kabki et al., 2004). The first migrant to travel to a developed country left the village in 1961 and went to Germany. Subsequent migrants went to the UK, The Netherlands, Canada, the USA, and several other European countries.

Akan funerals typically consist of five events. First is the one-week ceremony, in which the family come together one week after the death to decide when the funeral will be celebrated, the costs involved and the main organizers. The second is the ‘forty-days’ ceremony in which a successor to the deceased is officially announced. The successor inherits the property of the deceased, such as houses and businesses, and also customary responsibilities such as the care of certain individuals. Third is the funeral itself, which consists of the laying-in-state on Friday, the burial on Saturday (a gathering in which the mourning family receives most of the donations), and the thanksgiving church service on Sunday. The fourth event is the closing of accounts when the family gets together to assess how much was spent and how much was received in donations. If there is a debt, it is decided who will carry the burden. If there is a profit, it is decided how this will be distributed. And finally there is the one-year celebration that draws an official end to the mourning period. In this article, we cover the first four phases.

In Akua’s hometown, the traditional one-week gathering was a big event to which not only the family, but also most of the villagers came. The family offered drinks to people who had come to pay their respects, and received donations from visitors. On the same day, family members in Amsterdam also held a one-week ceremony to discuss some practical arrangements. Throughout the evening and night about forty people came to offer their condolences and share in the eating, drinking and dancing to gospel music. For this particular funeral the ‘forty-days’ ceremony was incorporated into the funeral itself because of a ban imposed by local traditional leaders on these celebrations, in an effort to prevent local citizens from spending too much on funeral related ceremonies (see Figure 2).

The funeral attracted more than 1,000 guests besides the family members, of which 100 were from Accra, 200 from Kumasi and other parts of the country, and the rest from Ayiase and its surrounding villages. Two sisters of the deceased came from overseas specially for the funeral while some other migrants, who happened to be in the country, also attended, including one from Belgium, one from Italy and a few friends of the two sister migrants from The Netherlands. Three foreign researchers and one research assistant from Accra were also present, adding to the prestige of the event. Representatives from the churches which the deceased had attended in Accra and a church she had attended in Kumasi also came. There were also many friends and colleagues of various family members.
### Figure 2. Timeline of Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9 Nov 2003</td>
<td>Death of Akua in Accra hospital. The same day the family in The Netherlands hear the news by phone, all the family in The Netherlands come together to mourn; they raise about US$ 1,200 to send to Accra.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Nov 2003</td>
<td>The news of Akua’s death reaches hometown Ayiase, the village, by evening. It is brought by a messenger from the Accra family. Villagers gather to mourn. From now till the funeral ceremony the house of the deceased is renovated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Nov 2003</td>
<td>Twenty family members from Accra and Kumasi arrive in Ayiase for the one-week celebration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Nov 2003</td>
<td>One-week celebration in Ayiase; the date of the funeral is fixed. One-week celebration in Amsterdam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Nov 2003</td>
<td>The Accra and Kumasi family members return home.</td>
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<tr>
<td>18 Nov 2003</td>
<td>The husband of the deceased comes to Ayiase and leaves the following day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Dec 2003</td>
<td>The messenger from Accra returns home from Ayiase.</td>
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<tr>
<td>mid Dec 2003</td>
<td>Meeting in Ayiase with family members from Accra and Kumasi to discuss details of the funeral.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Jan 2004</td>
<td>Arrival in Accra of Kate (sister) from The Netherlands.</td>
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<tr>
<td>17 Jan 2004</td>
<td>Arrival in Accra of Venus (sister) from The Netherlands.</td>
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<tr>
<td>20 Jan 2004</td>
<td>Arrival of Kate in Ayiase.</td>
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<tr>
<td>22 Jan 2004</td>
<td>Arrival of Venus in Ayiase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 Jan 2004</td>
<td>The body is brought from Accra mortuary to Ayiase and is laid-in-state during the night.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Night</td>
<td>Wake-keeping in Ayiase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 Jan 2004</td>
<td>Burial and funeral in Ayiase. Amsterdam migrants get together to mourn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Jan 2004</td>
<td>Thanksgiving service in Pentecost Church in Ayiase. Continuation of receiving funeral donations in Ayiase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 Jan 2004</td>
<td>Last day of receiving funeral donations in Ayiase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 Jan 2004</td>
<td>Closing of accounts by the family in Ayiase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Feb 2004</td>
<td>Return of Kate to Amsterdam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Feb 2004</td>
<td>Return of Venus to Amsterdam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 Mar 2004</td>
<td>Thanksgiving ceremony in a Methodist church in Amsterdam.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** thematic interviews, transaction studies, 2003–2004

The funeral ceremony included the most typical elements of an Akan funeral: a decorated coffin; many of the guests draped in black cloth bought especially for the occasion; intense wailing at the sight of the body; ornate decorations at the laying-in-state ceremony; food and drinks and live music and dancing. At the church thanksgiving service on the following day, some sixty family members could be seen wearing a particular kind of cloth which had been tailored into a variety of dresses and shirts or worn by the men in the traditional manner, draped around the body. Donations, the largest of which were announced on a loudspeaker, were made for three consecutive
days. During the nights it was impossible to sleep due to the loud music from
hired speakers and people shouting and drinking. Temporary streetlights
powered by a borrowed generator poured light over the streets during the
evenings, which people enjoyed immensely. A hired television and video
recorder provided rare entertainment for both the young and old, and the chaos
during the nights even tempted some youngsters to indulge in promiscuous
behaviour. After the public events of the funeral the family came together for
the closing of accounts meeting during which the total amount of donations
was counted and decisions were taken as to how to deal with the debt that
resulted from the funeral.

The ceremony described here, as with most funerals in central and south-
er Ghana today, contrasts sharply with the moderate gatherings of just thirty
years ago when people came together for one day to mourn and fast (Arhin,
1994; de Witte, 2001). Migration has played an important role in this devel-
opment. Since the 1980s Ghana has seen a sharp increase in the number of
migrants going to developed countries to earn a living. These migrants often
send remittances for the purposes of financing, wholly or partially, funerals
of important family members. Virtually everyone interviewed about this sub-
ject agreed that families with migrants overseas generally organize larger and
more lavish funerals than those families without migrant members.

TRANSNATIONAL ELEMENTS OF FUNERAL FINANCES, PRACTICES
AND CONTESTATIONS

Funeral Finances: A Multiplier Analysis

The involvement of migrants in funerals held in their home communities has
various implications for how funerals are financed and carried out. Given
the wide variety of people actually spending on the funeral, the multiplier
analysis which follows is not an exhaustive list of expenditures. Even the or-
ganizers themselves, no matter how meticulous they were in keeping records,
were not able to avoid disagreements and gave different estimates of expen-
ditures. However, having researchers in the four most important locations in
which family members were located did enable us to collect detailed data of
the largest expenditures and some of the smaller ones. This section discusses
the financing of the funeral, the sectors of the economy in which the money
was spent, and the geographic locations between which the money flowed.

Table 1 presents the total costs of the funeral (column A) as well as a
breakdown of costs incurred by the organizing family\(^9\) (column B) and the

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\(^9\) We use the term organizing family to distinguish between those members of the matriliny
responsible for the organization of the funeral and those members who are part of the
matriliny but are not responsible for the funeral organization. The latter we considered as
guests in the calculations.
### Table 1. Multiplier Effects of a Migrant-financed Funeral (in US$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Greater Ayiase</th>
<th>Kumasi</th>
<th>Accra</th>
<th>Netherlands</th>
<th>Rest World</th>
<th>Totals per Sector</th>
<th>Paid by Family²</th>
<th>Paid by Guests³</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transport</strong></td>
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<td>flight tickets of migrants</td>
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<tr>
<td>transportation from Accra by guests</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>→</td>
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<tr>
<td>transportation from Kumasi by guests</td>
<td>1500</td>
<td>→</td>
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<tr>
<td>transportation from surroundings by guests</td>
<td>1260</td>
<td>→</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>transportation of corpse</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>→</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>private transport by guests</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>→</td>
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<tr>
<td>transportation by family from Accra/Kumasi/Ayiase</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>←</td>
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<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
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<td>communication Amsterdam–Accra</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>→</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>printed and radio announcements</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>→</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>drinks offered with invitations</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>→</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>local transportation for personal invitations</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>→</td>
<td></td>
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<td><strong>Hospitality (food, drinks and furniture)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>food offered to guests during funeral</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>→</td>
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<tr>
<td>drinks bought by guests during funeral</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>→</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>drinks offered to guests during funeral</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>→</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>food bought, animals slaughtered by guests</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>→</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>other hospitality in Ayiase</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>→</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drinks for ceremony in Amsterdam</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>→</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>hospitality during one-week celebration</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>→</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>rent of canopy, chairs, mattresses</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>→</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural Services</strong></td>
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<td>music/dance group</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>→</td>
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<tr>
<td>electricity generator</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>→</td>
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<td>video recording</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>→</td>
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<tr>
<td>sound system</td>
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<th></th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
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<td>5500</td>
<td>2380</td>
<td>3120</td>
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<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td>750</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Hospitality (food, drinks and furniture)</strong></td>
<td>3300</td>
<td>2660</td>
<td>640</td>
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<td><strong>Cultural Services</strong></td>
<td>700</td>
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### Table 1. Continued

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Greater Ayiase</th>
<th>Kumasi</th>
<th>Accra</th>
<th>Netherlands</th>
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<th>Totals per Sector</th>
<th>A Paid by Family&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>B Paid by Guests&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Direct Burial/Funeral Costs</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>coffin</td>
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<td>850</td>
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<td>preservation in mortuary</td>
<td>330</td>
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<td>dressing and decorating of corpse</td>
<td>180</td>
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<td>renovation of houses of family members</td>
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<td>mourning cloth bought by some guests</td>
<td>260</td>
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<td>1400</td>
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<td>sewing of cloth of guests</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>130</td>
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<td>mourning cloth bought by family</td>
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<td>500</td>
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<td>sewing of cloth of family</td>
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<td>130</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Approximate totals per location</strong></td>
<td>3050</td>
<td>2950</td>
<td>5700</td>
<td>2200</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>14300</td>
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</table>

**Notes:** Arrows indicate most likely ultimate destination of money. This is calculated by estimating that 15 per cent of transport cost accrues to multinational oil companies through gasoline costs and 85 per cent of the value of internationally produced goods accrues to international or multinational companies.

<sup>1</sup>Data were collected in euros and converted to dollars using the exchange rate of 1 Euro = $1.26 for January 2004.

<sup>2</sup>Family is defined as the thirty members who organized and/or paid for the funeral.

<sup>3</sup>Total number of guests was approximately 1,000.

**Source:** Thematic interviews, transaction studies, 2003–2004.
guests who attended, including transportation costs to get to the funeral, the cost of new clothing, and so on (column C). Column A thus represents the economy-wide impact of this funeral while column B shows the impact on the organizing family. In Ghana, when people talk about funeral costs, they are generally referring to the costs mentioned in column B.

Funeral spending is widely dispersed throughout different economic sectors. Funeral spending supports a number of businesses such as construction, coffin makers, undertakers, printing presses and the cultural industry. In our broader study of thirty-four transnational networks (135 people) we came across film and television production studios that started as funeral video services, as well as graphic designers who had begun their businesses by designing cards and souvenirs for funerals. Performing at funerals is also a way for local musicians to begin their careers. Our analysis concurs with what others have described qualitatively (Arhin, 1994; de Witte, 2003).

By following the flows to different geographical locations, it is possible to see which locations and which sectors in each location benefited most. From Table 1 (column A) we can see that 40 per cent of funeral money was spent in Accra, 20 per cent in Kumasi, another 20 per cent in the village, and about 18 per cent in the rest of the world (through national and multinational companies such as KLM, Vlisco, Guinness and calling companies). However, following money flows to their most likely ultimate destinations (indicated in the table by the arrows), shows that a lot of money — amounting to almost 30 per cent of the total funeral costs — flowed to locations outside Ghana. The most striking finding from this picture is that, while the urban economy of Accra got the highest proportion of the money invested in this funeral, the second largest share went to the world economy. However, although the village received proportionately less, the amounts received had a large impact on the population, as will be shown below.

An analysis of sectors shows that in Kumasi and Accra it was the cultural sector, transport providers, funeral services, coffin artisans, cloth retailers, constructors/painters, and food and drink retailers who benefited. In the village, the consumption of food and drinks amounted to an unprecedented turnover for village businesses. All chop bars and drinking places reported a record turnover during Akua’s funeral. One bar recorded receipts of over US$ 100 in a single day; the equivalent of a four-month wage for a full-time labourer in the village. Provision stores, on the other hand, saw no increase in sales because it is not fitting for villagers and guests to go shopping during funerals.

Individual villagers also derived benefits from the funeral as they cooked and provided lodging for invited guests and were reimbursed for their expenses, usually at higher levels than the actual costs incurred (see below). Other beneficiaries at the village level were family members of another deceased person in the village, as the funeral of a local woman who had died
before Akua was celebrated on the same day and in the same market square.\textsuperscript{10} This family was able to make use of the rented chairs, music and canopy for free, saving them large amounts of money, and because of the large number of guests to Akua’s funeral, they also received many more donations. Their accounts and donations were not announced publicly, but it is very probable that they received more money in donations than they spent on the funeral.

Also at the village level, the church benefited from Akua’s funeral. During the thanksgiving service held on the last day of the funeral, approximately US$ 100 (nine times the usual amount) was collected by the Ayiase branch of the Church of Pentecost, of which US$ 60 was intended to go towards the construction of a new church building. The church had donated US$ 25 to the funeral, thus giving it a US$ 75 profit. This is equivalent to 15 per cent of its yearly earnings from harvests\textsuperscript{11} and weekly collections.

In terms of the financing of the funeral, we see that some US$ 9,550 was spent by the family; of this, just over 20 per cent was recouped from donations made at the ceremony. Migrants paid almost 70 per cent of the total (Figure 3). Kate (the sister in Amsterdam) first raised US$ 1,200 for the initial funeral expenses amongst the family members in The Netherlands, Italy and Germany, although most of the money was her own. Some of the family members in The Netherlands do not have well-paying jobs and others are unemployed, while Kate earns between US$ 1,000 and US$ 1,200 per

\textsuperscript{10} Local laws only allow funerals to be held on one day per month so the families agreed to hold their respective funerals on the same day.

\textsuperscript{11} During the twice-yearly harvests, larger than normal donations are made to the church. Usually such harvests have a specific goal for which funds are to be raised.
month cleaning private homes. From this salary she pays her own expenses, looks after the unemployed migrants, and often contributes to larger expenses that the migrants may incur (such as lawyer fees, visa fees, and other costs necessary for obtaining a staying permit). She later raised another US$ 5,000 dollars, most of which she carried with her when she travelled to Ghana. This means that a large portion of the remittances for the funeral did not pass through banking channels.

The amounts spent by migrants for this funeral are in line with more general findings of the broader study within which this case is embedded. Among twenty-nine Ghanaian migrants interviewed over a one-year period (2003–4), we recorded eight cases of a funeral occurring in the matrilineal family of a migrant. Spending amounted to an average of US$ 1,500 — or almost twice the average monthly income — with a standard deviation of almost US$ 3,000. More generally, remittances sent for funerals of people in Ghana (not limited to only the matriliny) by the twenty-nine migrants amounted to almost 10 per cent of all remittances sent over a one-year period. Funerals were one of the main uses of non-subsistence remittances sent by migrants to Ghana, after business, housing and education (Mazzucato, 2005b). For 2003, Ghana was estimated to have received as much as US$ 3 billion in remittances through both official and unofficial channels. We can therefore make the rough estimate that funeral remittances may have been as high as US$ 300 million in Ghana in 2003, or around 4 per cent of Ghana’s GDP for that year (estimated by the IMF at US$ 7.6 billion; IMF, 2006).

Practices

Communication

The way in which the death of the deceased was communicated to family members around the globe is an example of how practices change to adapt to the transnational context within which funerals are now organized. Figure 4 shows the flow of the news of Akua’s death. The news had made the full round in approximately one week.

Akua’s daughter, present at the time of Akua’s death, followed custom by first informing the eldest maternal uncle, Akwasi in Accra. He, in turn, informed his nephew, Kofi, owner of a communication centre in Accra, as he was judged best placed to spread the news. However, Kofi’s communication business was not going well so he ended up using his mobile phone to make the calls. The first person he phoned was the eldest sister of the deceased,

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12. The Bank of Ghana estimates remittances at US$ 1 billion in 2003 (Addison, 2004). However, including monies sent through unofficial channels, which are estimated at 65 per cent of total remittances by Mazzucato et al. (2005), total remittances sent to Ghana in 2003 are likely to be closer to US$ 3 billion.
Kate, in The Netherlands, who was asked to inform the rest of the migrants. Kate was too distraught by the news and asked her son, Edward, also in Amsterdam, to make the calls. When Amsterdam-based migrant, Okyeame, found out about the death of Akua, he knew that his brother and sister in Kumasi would not have yet heard the news because tradition dictates that the village should be the first to be informed, but he could not resist calling them as they are his closest siblings. An important element of this story is that Okyeame also called his prospective fiancé in Accra to tell her of the news and ensure that she would also attend the funeral. This will be discussed below.

Those in Kumasi who received the news on the same day as the death, however, were instructed not to inform the family in Ayiase. Because of their physical proximity to the village they could have passed on the information much faster than those from Accra, but the family in Accra did not want the news to reach the village in a roundabout way, as only someone from Accra could recount the details of the death and the decisions that had already been taken. Thus it was only the next day that the news reached Ayiase, brought personally by Yankson, a younger brother of the deceased.

As we can see from the flow of information, the order in which the news spread was in part dictated by custom but was also affected by technology
and economic considerations. Okyeame in Amsterdam explains why this is so: ‘they [the family in Accra] just came out and they called. Because at that time they needed money, so they had to call [us]... It’s a money matter’ (interview, Amsterdam, 13 December 2003). Okyeame’s comment points to two considerations. First, the family in Accra, to be able to keep the body of Akua in the mortuary until they were able to perform the funeral, needed to pay an advance of a few hundred dollars. As none of the Accra family members were in a position to pay this amount, they had phoned those in Amsterdam. The call had been not only to notify them of the death of Akua, but also to ask them to remit money to pay for the morgue. Secondly, because the family in Amsterdam has more disposable income to make phone calls and because calling rates from The Netherlands are lower than from Ghana, they could notify the other migrants in The Netherlands, Germany and the UK, as well as others in Ghana. These considerations overruled the custom that family in the village should have been informed first, or at the same time as the rest of the family.

Deciding the Date of the Funeral

Customarily, the one-week ceremony is the time when the family officially comes together to make decisions regarding the date of the funeral, the finances and who will carry out which tasks. However, in our case study, many decisions had already been made in Accra and Amsterdam prior to that date. There were urgent matters to solve such as whether to put the body in a morgue and if so, which one. They would also need to pay for a good doctor to check periodically if the body was being well preserved, and to rent a bus to take the family to the hometown for the one-week meeting.

These matters were all communicated between Akwasi in Accra and Kate in Amsterdam. Akwasi arranged a meeting in Accra on the Wednesday before the one-week meeting to discuss these details with the family members in Accra. The Amsterdam-based migrants called during that meeting to give their opinions regarding the location, date and kind of funeral. Much communication went back and forth between Akwasi and Kofi in Accra and Kate in Amsterdam, during which Kate let them know that she and her sister Venus would be coming for the funeral and that they preferred the end of January as the date. On the one hand they needed time to collect the money for the funeral, to arrange time off from Kate’s employers, to organize air travel, and to ship second-hand clothing to distribute to the extended family and friends. On the other hand, they did not want to wait too long so as to keep mortuary costs affordable. Akwasi also needed time to organize the different elements of the funeral. Having weighed these considerations against the costs of the mortuary, they decided the end of January would be an appropriate time for the funeral. Akwasi also made clear to Kate that they needed money right
away for the mortuary, transport to Ayiase and drinks to be offered at the one-week ceremony.

However, the date, that was chosen — 24 January — fell within a two-month period in which all funerals are banned in the Traditional Area under which Ayiase falls. This ban lasts from one month prior to Christmas to one month after Christmas, the publicly-stated rationale being the protection of citizens from spending too much money in too short a period. An Accra delegation arrived at the village for the one-week ceremony during which the delegation asked traditional leaders for permission to violate the ban. After being customarily presented with one crate of soft drinks, the leaders agreed to the date.

The date of the funeral, therefore, is the outcome of juggling customary considerations with practical ones to cater to the needs of overseas migrants, and reflects the fact that people at home expect migrants to contribute generously to funerals and to give gifts to those they know.

**Managing Finances**

In the case of a transnational funeral the main financers, the migrants, are not physically present to oversee spending, leading to the risk that other people could misuse the money. The migrants’ strategy for dealing with this potential problem was to choose one person to whom the money was sent — Akwasi in Accra. In this way, they could hold one person accountable for the finances and reduce communication costs. This also minimized the chances of being overwhelmed by requests for money from all sides. If people needed money they had to ask Akwasi, who would allocate it according to plan and register all expenditures. Okyeame explains this protective strategy:

> We don’t want to separate the money . . . We are here, we are struggling, you understand? So if we do things easily, they think here it’s easy. You have to give the money to one specific person. Akwasi, he is the senior in the family now. So is Kofi, they are working together. So if Kofi needs something he asks Akwasi, then they write. If my mother needs something, they have to give it to her, then they write. Because if we separate the money, they will want more money. (Interview, Amsterdam, 14 November 2003)

They chose Akwasi for this task based on three considerations: first, they trusted him. Akwasi is a family elder and he has never been accused of mismanaging family money. Second, Akwasi is based in Accra where phone reception is good and where money transfer services are available. Third, the migrants were acting according to custom by appointing an elder family member to a position of responsibility. Akwasi, in turn, delegated the practical arrangements to his nephew Kofi: making phone calls and printing the invitations, placing colour obituaries and organizing paper brooches to be worn during the ceremony. Akwasi chose Kofi because in his view Kofi was an able young man who had time available, as he was only working
part-time, unlike Akwasi himself. Akwasi’s role as main manager of funds had implications for him in the contestations that followed the funeral.

Contestations

As often is the case with funerals, there were disagreements surrounding finances. However, the fact that large sums of money were remitted by migrants who were not there to oversee the spending created competition amongst family members for control over funeral funds. In the hometown, the family were unhappy that Kate had entrusted the money to people in Accra instead of in the hometown. The fact that obituary posters were being printed in Accra, where rates are higher, also led to discussion at the one-week meeting in the hometown, as village-based family members felt that funeral expenses were being pushed up unnecessarily.

A number of family members were also displeased with the invitations made in Accra. The names of Kate, Venus, and Akua’s widower were not mentioned on the invitation. Bill, the organizer of the funeral in the village, claimed to have instructed Kofi to print the invitation on both sides to provide enough space for all names. In his opinion the absence of the names of those abroad was shameful: ‘If someone asks them why their names were not on the invitation card of their own relative, they cannot defend themselves’.

During the closing of accounts meeting, many family members claimed that they had incurred costs for the funeral; discussions arose as to whether these costs were genuine, leaving some family members and at least one migrant with the impression that some people were trying to make a profit. The family in the village also felt that too much money had been spent on the renovation of Akua’s house, because family members from Accra had brought painters and labourers from there to do the work. Furthermore, those in the hometown felt that Kofi could not completely account for all the expenses he had made. Kofi defended himself, claiming that he had even put the last of his savings, around US$ 75, towards funeral expenses, especially to provide the necessary hospitality at the house of Akua to people passing through while he was in the hometown. Given the losses the organizing family had made, he had decided not to declare these expenses at the closing of accounts meeting, even though others had done so. Kate noted with displeasure that Kofi’s own house in the village had been substantially renovated, implying that funds had been misappropriated. At the same time, Kofi and some of the ‘Kumasi people’ expressed their anger at Bill for buying more food and drink than was necessary to satisfy the guests. They felt that this accounted for much of the unnecessary expense of the funeral, and for the loss that they had made.

In short, contestations, part of the ordinary process around funerals, were accentuated by the transnational element because financiers overseas had limited possibilities to check spending, and because the large sums typical of migrant-financed funerals represented greater stakes to be won in the battle for the appropriation of funds.
THE ROLE OF FUNERALS IN TRANSNATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Many migrants interviewed in the course of this research criticized the lavishness of funerals, especially because the financial burden primarily falls on them. However, when it is their turn to organize a funeral for an important family member, it is difficult if not impossible for them to renege on their social responsibility, and they succumb to the pressures and expectations that are put upon them. Funerals and other rites of passage have been described as important in allowing migrants to maintain ties with their home communities (Al Ali, 2002; Fog Olwig, 2002). This section focuses on this aspect of funerals and the fact — less discussed in migration literature — that funerals are also a way for home communities to keep migrants interested in them.

Funerals and Respect

Okyeame had anticipated the loss that would be incurred at the funeral and the fact that the migrants overseas would finance it. He explained that the funeral had to be big because their ‘sister’ was an important person and they, the migrants, were there to finance it. Donations were expected to be small because the funeral was held in a rural village where most guests would not be able to contribute much financially.

During the closing of accounts meeting held on the Tuesday after the funeral, the debt was confirmed. After some quarrelling, with people being accused of overspending, Kate, who had remained quiet during the whole meeting, interrupted and announced that she would pay the remaining debt because it is not good for a family to quarrel. As a result of the funeral, Kate has inherited responsibility for various parts of the extended family and has a large financial debt, but she has also earned the respect of her family and fellow villagers. Being the eldest sister, she is the successor to Akua according to custom (La Ferrara, 2006; Fortes, 1950; Okali 1983). As such, she is in charge of the distribution of the possessions of the deceased after one year of her death and also takes responsibility for the welfare of the children of the deceased, of whom one is still in school. Furthermore, Akua had already inherited the care of the children of her elder sister, who had died six years before. Thus Kate also has to provide the necessary support to the children of the first sister. Even before leaving The Netherlands for Ghana, she had started the procedure to obtain papers for one of these young adults to come and join her in The Netherlands. The idea is that he could earn money to support this branch of the family and thus relieve Kate of some of the financial burden that her new responsibilities entail.

13. Since the mid-1980s, this tradition has undergone some change with the introduction of the PNDC Intestate Succession Law 111. However the tradition continues to be practised by many Akan families (GRI Newsreel, 2001; www.newsinghana.com, 2002).
The debt incurred at the funeral is thus only part of the financial burden born by migrants, in this case predominantly Kate and Venus as the eldest sisters of the deceased and the only ones amongst the migrants with jobs. However, by taking on the debt, they also consolidated the respect they had earned throughout the funeral. In fact, the only people who escaped criticism from fellow family members during the entire funeral were Kate, Venus and the other migrants.

Funerals are a way for the whole matrilineal kin group, the abusua, to gain prestige (van der Geest, 2000; de Witte, 2003). This particular funeral made a large impression on the village. Thanks to the substantial contributions of Kate and Venus, the whole abusua has gained prestige within their home community and surroundings. As Berry explains, ‘in coming together to honour 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). Kate, especially, now the eldest of one branch of the family, has established her right as an important member of the abusua, and essential family matters must now also be discussed with her. Kate’s large investment in the funeral is a way for her to re-establish and legitimize her position within the abusua despite the great geographical distance separating her from them.

Funerals as Wedding Markets

Funerals fulfil another function for migrants. They are important homecoming events for those who reside outside the village. Those who can afford to come home only once or twice a year do so during funerals rather than other occasions. Indeed, in this case, most family members in Accra and abroad did not come to the village for Christmas 2003 or Easter 2004 — two typical occasions when migrants visit their hometown — in order to be able to attend the funeral in January. As such, funerals provide the perfect context for making potential marriage contacts for those migrants wishing to marry members of their home community. Okyeame, in Amsterdam, used the funeral to obtain information about a woman he was considering marrying. The woman was originally from the village but had lived in Accra all her life. Okyeame thus instructed his sister in Kumasi to ‘ask around’ in the village as to her background and eligibility according to custom14 and to observe her in order to report on her ‘character’. The investigation had a negative outcome; Okyeame greatly appreciated the service as it prevented him from committing a ‘grave error’. This shows one of the social elements of funerals that de Witte (2001) also observed: their function as wedding markets. Here there is also a transnational character, allowing a migrant to

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14. Customary rules dictate whether marriages can occur between certain families.
obtain information about a potential marriage partner to which he or she would not otherwise have access, being absent from the hometown.

**Keeping Migrants Interested in their Hometown**

Why are migrants interested in gaining respect from their home community when they are living so far away? Okyeame explains that no matter where people migrate to, they want to come back to their hometown and ultimately be buried there: ‘You see ... when you are young, nobody wants to live in the village, but when you are old, everybody comes back there’ (interview, Amsterdam, 13 December 2003). In Ayiase, for example, the first migrant who left in 1961 came back after forty-two years to retire in the home he built there. Kate and Venus are also in the process of building their own or their family house in Ayiase, and envisage a time in the future when they will return.

Various authors have explained the complex Akan cosmology regarding death (Amponsah, 1977; Arhin, 1994; Rattray, 1927; Sarpong, 1974). For the purposes of this article it is important to know that death and funerals are moments of contact with the ancestors and the *asamando*, the land of the dead. Only a person who has led a successful life will be admitted to the land of the ancestors. One way to prove one’s success is through the size and scale of one’s funeral (de Witte, 2001: 24–9). Ancestors influence life on earth and funerals are times when one can honour or offend the ancestors, depending on how a funeral is performed. At the same time funerals are important for the entire *abusua*. They can bestow prestige or shame on the family of the deceased person (van der Geest, 1995, 2000). It is thus of great importance for both the living and the dead to have a grand funeral in one’s hometown.

However, in order to be well received in the hometown, and to ensure that one’s own funeral and those of family members can be held there, it is necessary to have the approval of the village elders. These elders look at the person’s past contributions and attendance at funerals in the village. If this is judged to be unsatisfactory, the elders will decide on a fee to be paid before the funeral ceremony can be held in the village. In the past, it was possible to oversee the contributions and attendances of village members, but increasing migration and the phenomenon of people going further away for longer periods have made it difficult for many to be physically present at funerals, and for those who remain behind to oversee the flows of people and money.

In 1997, the village implemented a system — now typical of small villages in the Ashanti Region — for keeping track of people’s donations to funerals. Every villager is expected to pay a fixed funeral donation at every funeral, irrespective of where he or she actually lives. This is recorded on a special funeral donation card, which every adult and employed village citizen holds, whether living in or outside the village. Migrants are exempt from being
physically present at every funeral but they are expected to donate through the members of their extended family who are present at the funeral. In Ayiase, the donations of the village generate about US$ 30 per funeral. Of this, 10 per cent is meant for community projects and 90 per cent is given to the bereaved family — as long as that family has paid all its village development dues and funeral donations to other families in the past. Any default amount is deducted before the money is given to the family. If the default is judged to be too large, elders can impede the funeral of the defaulter’s family members on village territory.

In practice, only about 500 of the 1,700 people eligible for a card actually hold one. Although this shows that there is a voluntary element to this system, the potentiality of a sanction functions as a way of keeping villagers — irrespective of where they live — engaged in village matters. As such, funerals are important institutions for keeping transnational ties alive.

CONCLUSIONS

In many cultures funerals are becoming a multi-sited phenomenon. Increasing international migration and the availability of modern communication technologies create the conditions for family members abroad to play significant roles in funeral financing and practice. In this article we have studied an Akan funeral on a transnational scale by following all of the actors involved in financing, planning and carrying out a funeral in four different locations around the globe. Observations of other Akan funerals and quantitative remittance data collected amongst Ghanaian migrants in The Netherlands indicate that the findings from this case are relevant for Akan funerals in general, and they point to some wider trends experienced in cultures where migrants play important roles in the organization and financing of funerals around the globe.

Three implications are drawn. First, this study has shown that funerals can be highly transnational events. The large multiplier effects of funerals make them occasions of redistribution and re-channelling of resources and affiliations around the globe. Thus, from both an anthropological interest in the practice of funerals, and an economic interest in financial flows, there is reason to call for a transnational approach to the study of funerals. Multi-sited research can help to understand how transnational flows of people, money and ideas affect the practice and finances of funerals as well as how relationships between migrants and people back home are established, maintained and redefined.

Second, we have shown that funerals involve large sums of money; after business, housing and education, they are one of the main uses of non-subistence remittances sent by migrants to Ghana. As such, they are significant economic events, which should be included in economic studies of remittances and in migration and development studies. Currently, there are
very few studies that look into the economics of funerals, in part because funeral expenses are difficult to capture with commonly used data collection tools. We have seen that funeral expenditures are incurred in different locations by different people, not all within the same household, over an extended period of time. Single-visit, household questionnaires are thus inadequate for collecting data on such fragmented expenditures. Attention needs to be given to the particular nature of funeral expenditures and data collection tools need to be developed accordingly.

Migration and development studies should also pay greater attention to the practice of funerals. We have seen that the desirability of being buried in one’s hometown provides a strong incentive for migrants to remain actively engaged with their home communities. Thus far, studies seeking to explain migrants’ continued interest in their original communities have emphasized the role of inheritance (de la Brière et al., 2002; Lucas and Stark, 1985; Platteau and Baland, 2001). This study has shown that in the Akan case, funerals function as moments of contact with the world of the dead and as one of the major ways of eliciting respect among the living; they are thus important arenas in which migrants and communities reinforce their relationships and through which communities can sanction migrants who are judged to have distanced themselves from community matters. Funerals are an important factor in explaining why migrants remain engaged in home community matters and continue to remit to the abusua and the home community at large.

Third, funerals can be seen as ambiguous affairs, which has implications in terms of policy. On the one hand, they entail large financial burdens for migrants — and, moreover, transnational funerals may be inflating the price of funerals in general, also raising the financial burden for those without migrants in their families. On the other hand, transnational funerals provide opportunities for home villages to keep migrants actively engaged, resulting in remittances from migrants to individuals and communities. Funerals have multiplier effects for villages and cities in Ghana, but at the same time a large part of what is spent ultimately ends up in profits for multinationals. It is therefore too simplistic to claim that funerals are ‘wasteful’ cultural events as claimed in public discourse on funerals in Ghana.15

Given the cultural importance of Akan funerals, we follow Manuh (1995) in concluding that current policy attempts to curb funeral spending are unlikely to succeed in the near future. One policy avenue to explore is that of providing savings and insurance accounts through local organizations.16 Such a scheme could involve credit unions that offer multiple services: a savings account to

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15. For examples of public discourse in Ghana regarding the need to curb funeral spending, see Adzigodie (2004); Dzandu (2003); GRI Newsreel (2003).
16. While many private initiatives exist to mitigate the cost of funerals such as ‘funeral funds’ to which different members of a collective (family, business colleagues, church members, etc.) make regular contributions, these usually do not go through formal banking channels.
which a migrant can remit, tied to a funeral insurance account to which a sum is transferred periodically from the savings account. This has the advantage that credit unions, by virtue of their statutes, reinvest their profits in the local community. Such a scheme protects migrants and other family members from the sudden income shocks that funerals entail, while retaining more of the multiplier effects of funerals within Ghana. It also allows funerals to continue as events that keep migrants transnationally engaged in the abusua and their hometown community.

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