Introduction

A successful funeral

Everybody in Bekwai is wearing black on Tuesday morning October 27th, 1998. There must be *ayie*, a funeral, in town today. Nana, my grandmother, is the first to tell me that ‘Captain’s sister’ has died. Agnes Ankobiah alias Akua Afriyie lived and worked as a teacher in Tema and her family in Bekwai heard the news by phone. She died unexpectedly in her sleep, one week ago, at the age of 52 years. Today the family is celebrating *nnawstwe da*, weekday, in the family house at Roman Down. Nana went to greet them early this morning already, so I go with her friend Akyeampomaa. I worry about my clothing, which is, though dark brown in colour, not a proper funeral dress, but Akyeampomaa assures me that it is all right, since it is only the week celebration, not the real funeral (*ayie pa*). I tie one of Nana’s black headscarves around my head and we set off to greet the family.

Week celebration

The loud music indicates the house from afar. We enter the courtyard, where hired plastic chairs and canopies provide shady seating for all sympathisers. In the middle a large framed black-and-white portrait of Agnes in her thirties is exposed on a chair covered with lace. The sight of this healthy and beautiful young woman makes me feel sad. A few women are wailing heartrendingly. Sisters, Akyeampomaa says. We go round and greet everybody by shaking hands. Amidst all people in black or dark brown mourning cloth, sits the mother, dressed in white and staring straight ahead without shedding a tear. She is, like all parents who loose a child, not allowed to mourn her daughter.

Akyeampomaa and I sit down and watch the *nnwomkor* group perform their songs and dances. The dancer demonstrates her dancing skills by dancing towards Agnes’ portrait and several people press a 5000-cedis note on her forehead. The *nnwomkor* alternates with highlife songs blasting from the big loud-speakers and several short speeches and announcements. The master of ceremonies announces a donation of schnapps and beer, the date of the funeral, and shows the blue-and-white cloth the family has chosen for the thanksgiving service after the funeral. Everybody who wishes can buy it and wear it that Sunday. Until the day of the funeral, almost three weeks from now, Agnes’ body will be kept in the ‘fridge’ in Tema.
A few days later funeral posters announcing Auntie Aggie’s funeral appear in town. Her full coloured portrait picture stands out between the usual black-and-white pictures of other deceased persons and raises expectations about the oncoming funeral. Several tailor shops in town are busy tailoring the blue-and-white thanksgiving cloth into fancy dresses.

**Laying-in-state**

The burial and the funeral of Agnes Ankobiah take place on Saturday November 14th. When my other grandmother Yaa Mansah (Nana’s half-sister by the same father) and I arrive at the family house at six in the morning, it is already crowded. We greet the mpaninfo, the elders, who are seated in the front row, and then go round to greet the rest. Some people wear a black T-shirt with Agnes’ portrait printed on it. Agnes is laid in state in one of the rooms and the signs ‘in’ and ‘out’ regulate the flow of people. The viewing room has been beautifully decorated with lace, plastic plants and flowers and colourful kente cloth. In a big shiny, golden bed Agnes is lying in state like a bride. She wears a white wedding dress, white lace gloves, lots of golden jewellery and beads, a wig and heavy make-up. Earlier this morning the family has congregated around the body to pour libation and pray to the ancestors. Now the Roman and the Anglican priests and a group of church-women come in. We stand around the bed while the priest blesses the body and say the Lord’s Prayer and ten Hail Marys. The women start singing church songs from the hymnbooks they have brought. Everything is recorded by one of the hired video men, while his assistant lets his bright lamp shine on Agnes’ body. Now wailing starts. Women walk around the dead body, lamenting on this terrible loss, addressing the deceased, and throwing their arms up into the air in despair.

Meanwhile at the courtyard a DJ lets highlife hits and gospel songs blast from huge loudspeakers. The music is interrupted by the presentation of the adesiedee, the ‘burial things’. Blue-and-white cloth, bottles of Dutch schnapps, white hankies with money tied in one corner and a ring tied in the other corner, are being presented on silver trays and announced to the public through the microphone. But more than the things itself, also the givers are being presented. Agnes will take the things with her on her way to the world of the ancestors, so that she can buy some water during the journey and share some of the presents with those who have taken the lead and who are expecting something from their living relatives. All things are collected in a big bag by the family, who will symbolically put a few items into the coffin and share the rest among themselves.

The master of ceremonies announces the arrival of the coffin and seven men, one of whom is Agnes’ son, carry a classy gold painted coffin with golden decorations and put it in the courtyard. Utterances of admiration. They say it is imported from Europe. Behind a curtain Agnes is laid into the coffin. A man takes a sip of schnapps into his mouth and sprays it over Agnes’ face three times. A piece of blue-and-white
cloth is torn into strips, some of which are put into the coffin and some tied around the wrists of family members, as a sign of bereavement. Then they close the coffin.

**Burial**

Yaa Mansah takes me to her house for breakfast, otherwise we will faint during mass, she says. When we come out on the street, we notice the crowd outside the family house. There are many women in fancy dresses, wearing high heels and fashionable head ties. There can be no doubt they are from Accra. They have parked their beautiful cars right in front of the house. Big signposts have been placed all over town to direct visitors to the house, the church, and the funeral grounds. On the way to church some women distribute small, coloured portraits of Agnes to be pinned on your cloth and colour printed funeral programmes with the ‘highlights’ of the funeral, the programme of the burial mass, the biography of Agnes and the tributes by brothers and sisters, children and friends that will be read out in church, and some pictures. People rush to get one of the glossy booklets.

After the burial mass in the Roman Catholic Church, more or less a standard mass, followed by tributes in both Twi and English, we walk in procession to the cemetery, singing. The coffin is transported in an army vehicle; Agnes’ brother is a captain in the army. The atmosphere is peaceful, solemn, almost holy. How different from the chaotic, boisterous, even a little violent way to the cemetery of Yaa Mansah’s 29 year old nephew two days before. When he was buried people were drunk, made all kinds of noise, started fighting and went out of their senses with grief. Now there is nothing of this. Agnes’ funeral passes orderly.

At the cemetery a woman urges me to take a picture of the empty grave, which is cemented and whitewashed, one more status symbol. When the coffin arrives and is lowered into the grave, people cry quietly, totally different from the wailing this morning. After some prayers the priest blesses the grave and drops the first scoop of earth into it. Then he presents the wreaths and puts them onto the coffin. ‘From mother’, ‘from father’, ‘from husband’, we read on the printed notes attached to them.

**Funeral rites**

The funeral celebration takes place that afternoon at the police headquarters’ grounds in the town centre. I go there with Joana and Nana. Nana doesn’t like going round the whole square to shake hands with everybody, but Joana, her daughter, says this happens to be *amammere*, custom, and moreover, it is important to greet so that everybody notices your presence. So we go round and greet and during this many meetings take place, especially between Joana, who comes from Bekwai but doesn’t live here any longer, and old friends and acquaintances. The members of Agnes’ family are easily recognisable by the plain red mourning cloth they are all wearing. The funeral is very well attended. All queen-mothers of Bekwai have come
to pay their respects. People have travelled from all over Ghana to Bekwai to be present. They sit together and chat; the atmosphere is one of a happy meeting again. Tears and wailing are absent now.

A military brass band provides swinging music for people to dance. They take turns with the drummers and singers of the *nnwomkor* group. A professional dancer skillfully dances towards the chief, who praises her dancing skills, as do many others. It is a beautiful piece of culture, people say. In between the music, a woman takes the microphone to announce donations to the family by the guests. The names of the givers and the amounts of money given are loudly made known to all present. Usually the donation one makes depends upon the drinks and the food being served. The more one receives, the more one will give. But now no drinks are being served, and no food, only water. The chief of Bekwai has recently prohibited the serving of drinks and food to suppress funeral expenses. But although drinks are lacking, the whole funeral shows that this family has money, and that they do not hesitate spending it to give their beloved Agnes a befitting farewell.

Auntie Agnes’ funeral was a successful one. There were lots of people, important people too, and their donations were high. There was good music, performed by two groups, and good dancing. In the morning plenty of tears were shed, lots of gifts were presented and the coffin was outstandingly beautiful. Everything was very well organised. Moreover, three video men had covered the whole celebration from minute to minute. Indeed, as people kept on saying, *yen were mfi Akua Afriyie da*, we will never forget Akua Afriyie. The family has done well, *abusuafo aye adee paa*.

### Funerals in Ghana

Since my first stay in Ghana in 1995 I have been fascinated by the great importance Asante attach to funerals. In the course of three subsequent stays in Asante I attended more than fifty funeral celebrations. ‘Although every funeral was different and that of Agnes Ankobia was classier than average, the over-all image of most of them was much like the one described above. In Ghana one sometimes gets the impression that people care more about their dead than about the living. The elaborate funeral celebrations during which no trouble or expenses are spared contrast sharply with the daily struggle for the primary necessities of life. People spend amazingly much time and money on funerals. 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 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 *troto*s (minibuses for public transport) are stuffed with funeral guests going home. And in Kumasi 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 diverse forms of expression and art come together. Cultural groups perform traditional drum music or songs; a funeral is the place to show your dancing skills; highlife musicians make popular songs especially for funerals, commenting on the deep sorrow caused by death; pieces of poetic oratory tell of 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 parts of the life of the deceased are acted out in theatre. Death, more than any other life event, seems to inspire people to artistic creations. A funeral celebration is a big explosion of life. It is an experience, which involves all senses. The music is so loud one cannot possibly hear one’s neighbour. Visibility, seeing and being seen, is the core of every funeral. The abundant use of ‘schnapps’, *akpeteshi* (local gin) and beer makes the air heavy with alcohol. Shaking hundreds of hands gives a tactile impression of every person. Visiting a funeral means immersing oneself in an atmosphere loaded with emotions.

The importance and scale of funerals in Ghanaian – and specifically Asante – society today strike many visitors to Ghana. But also in the olden days funeral celebrations have impressed and surprised foreign travellers and researchers. It is from their descriptions that we can get an impression of what a funeral used to be like before the advent of sound systems, mortuaries, video cameras, and the like.

‘The whole time is spent in firing guns, drumming, dancing, and singing. The widow sits beside the body, fanning away the flies, and sleeps beside it when she is exhausted. Everyone generally becomes very drunk, but we should not pass a very severe judgement on this account. [...] these rites may seem to the uninstructed somewhat heartless shows, as mirth and jollity are not altogether absent’ (Rattray 1927: 151).

A contributor to The Gold Coast Review of 1925 comments on the Akim-Abuakwa (another Akan group) funeral custom,

‘which plays such an important and, as many consider, undesirable part in the life of the people. [...] The body is washed, enveloped as far as the arm pits in fine cloths, and laid out on the bed. Personal property is conspicuously displayed. The family group themselves about the body and friends come to view it. Burial is
usually performed on the following day. The young men fire guns day and night, play drums, and drink. Ordinarily this revelry lasts for four days and is the cause of much drunkenness and debt, contracted by the relatives of the deceased, who bear all the expenses’ (Shaw 1925: 62).

Documents like these show us that in the olden days the importance attached to funeral ceremonies was also great. The basics underlying the centrality of funerals in Akan culture seem to have been rather constant. So too does the delirious atmosphere so often witnessed today. Descriptions of ‘revelry’, ‘drunkenness’, ‘jollity’ and ‘show’ are recognised in modern day funeral celebrations. The scale of funerals, however, seems to have been much smaller in the olden days and the form quite different. Many of the traditional practices have disappeared and many new customs have been introduced.

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 modernity, including individualisation, urbanisation, market economy, and Christianity. The opposite scenario is taking place in Ghana. Funerals are, more than any other ceremony, only gaining more and more in scale and importance. Technological innovations like mortuaries, mass media, and electronic apparatus have enlarged possibilities and have given the funeral new dimensions. This funeral expansion entails high expenses and gives rise to a hot debate in the media, in the churches and among people themselves about the disproportionate cost of current funeral practices. Also, there are attempts to curtail these, especially by Traditional Councils and churches, but also by individuals. How funerals should be carried out is much debated upon. After every death a whole process of discussions and negotiations starts about what should be done, where, how, and by whom. Things that seem obvious suddenly become points of conflict. At many of the funerals I attended, I heard disagreeing voices, sometimes outright quarrels.

Here we are dealing with a phenomenon which is, for most Asante themselves, at the heart of their culture and tradition and which proves to be, at the same time, very absorptive of new forms and practices. Also, it is a practice that, in spite of its cultural and social centrality, clearly has no fixed scenario, but needs constantly to be negotiated. It is a phenomenon that evokes much discussion and seems to ask for regulation and curtailment. A phenomenon like this immediately calls a lot of questions to mind. Why are funerals so important? How does a funeral performance get its particular form? Which parties are involved in ‘shaping death’? How do they contribute to the funeral performance? What is their agenda, their interest? What do they want to express? What is their place in society? How is all this related to social-historical and cultural developments?

Fascinated by the funeral phenomenon, with a lot of questions in mind, and in the conviction that funerals offer a fruitful vantage point from which to view contemporary Ghanaian society (cf. Venbrux 1995), I went back to Ghana in July 1998.
to do seven months of anthropological fieldwork in the Asante region. This book describes how Asante in present-day Ghana shape and give meaning to their funeral celebrations. It aims at understanding current transformations of funeral practices in a way that leaves room for creative interaction and for the dynamic nature of Ghanaian funerals.

Anthropology and the study of death

Rites of passage

The large amount of time, effort, and money that people spend on funerals is by no means unique for the Asante. The elaborate attention devoted to funeral rites by peoples all over the globe has always occupied anthropologists. Many studies of death rituals are inspired by a paradigm rooted in Van Gennep’s analysis of *rites de passage* (1909) and elaborated by Turner. Van Gennep saw the death ritual as a symbolic representation of the ambiguous, liminal status of the deceased during the transition from life to an eternal existence after death. This ritual transition starts with the separation of the deceased from earthly existence, after which s/he enters a phase of liminality, being no longer of this world, but not yet fully of the other world, and ends with the incorporation in the world of the dead. This tripartite analytical scheme can be widely applied and has therefore become an anthropological classic. Yet it cannot provide much insight into the specific forms of burying the dead, such as the exuberance of Ghanaian funerals. Why should the transition to an existence after death be marked by vitality, and not, as is the case in most Western societies, by concealment and modesty? And what to make of the video men, the portrait pictures, the newly bought thanksgiving cloth, the glossy funeral programme and the golden coffin we saw at Agnes Ankobiah’s funeral? How to understand the libation to the ancestors prior to the Christian prayers, and the prohibition of serving soft drinks? And why was this particular funeral considered such a successful one?

Several studies in the anthropology of death (Metcalf & Huntington 1991; Bloch and Parry 1982) show that funerals, more than other *rites de passage*, are closely related to life values, symbolically as well as sociologically. Rather than beliefs about death and about life after death, it is the ideas and attitudes people have towards life that may help us explain why Asante funerals are as grand and elaborate as they are. During the funeral celebrations the focus is mainly on life on earth, more on the continuity of the living than the continuity of the dead. Metcalf and Huntington (1991: 110) state that the emphasis on life and vitality may be a universal aspect of funeral celebrations. For them the relevance of Van Gennep’s tripartite scheme is the ‘creative way in which it can be combined with cultural values to grasp the conceptual vitality of each ritual’ (ibid.: 112). Bloch and Parry, primarily interested in the symbolism of sexuality and fertility in mortuary rituals in relation to the organi-
sational aspects of society, take as a starting point that mortuary practices reflect not so much a ‘society’ responding to the ‘sacrilege’ of death, but are themselves occasions for creating that ‘society’ (1982: 6). With a focus on cultural values of life and the idea of creating society we can look at Asante death rituals as a creative process rather than a series of strictly prescribed symbolic actions.

This is what Turner (1969) did when elaborating on the liminal phase of rites de passage. He argues that actually the whole ritual process is liminal, because all phases happen in a time outside ‘normal’ time and in a space apart from ‘normal’ space. For Turner not the liminal status of the deceased is important in the first place, but the liminal time-space in which the whole community is situated. Liminality is a moment outside the usual social order, during which the daily order can be turned upside down, reflected upon, or transformed: a so-called anti-structure. Turner’s concept of liminality provides an entry to understand the funeral celebration as a kind of ritual space, set apart from daily reality and freed from its restrictions, to negotiate social identities and relations and to reflect upon and play with desires and imaginations. This may be a very fruitful starting point from which to view Asante funerals. But rather than seeing the funeral as a liminal space in which ‘secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenised’ (Turner 1969: 95), I will focus on death as an occasion for the elaboration of differences, the competition for status and power and the negotiation of culture (cf. Masquelier n.d; Venbrux 1995).

Studies of Akan funerals

Not surprisingly, Akan funerals have attracted much attention from social scientists. However, up till now there are very few elaborate studies. Moreover, many accounts give a rather static image of ‘the’ funeral. The British government anthropologist Rattray devotes one chapter of his classic study of the Asante (1927) to ‘funeral rites for ordinary individuals’. His elaborate description of the Asante funeral is most valuable for the detailed information it provides on funeral practices in the first decades of the 20th century. The general image he gives us of a well attended celebration with a lot of music, dancing, drinking and wailing can still be found in a contemporary funeral, but many of the practices that he describes, such as general fasting, firing of guns, placing of food for the deceased, and widowhood rites, have practically disappeared. Rattray’s work still serves as a major source of information for scholars writing on Asante funerals (e.g. Arhin 1994; Manuh 1995) and also for ‘traditionalists’ in Ghana.

After Rattray many others have written about Asante funerals from different perspectives. I will mention a few important studies and the questions they leave open. Vollbrecht did anthropological fieldwork in an Asante village and devoted her dissertation (1978) specifically to Asante funerals. She sees the significance of funerals in their function of reinforcing communitas and confirming social structure. Her interpretation of the importance of funerals in Asante goes beyond the often taken-for-granted truism that ancestors are important. She argues that funerals are increasingly
significant today, because they serve as an area of defence against outside threats of village structure and unity. Although she pays considerable attention to social and cultural change, my problem with her account is her representation of this change. First she gives a thorough analysis of the harmonious ‘traditional structure’ of an Asante village, characterised by the close intertwinement of cosmology and social structure. Change only comes with the ‘threats to traditional structure’: Christianity and modern, secular, European-derived institutions. The Asante people themselves are in this process no more than onlookers, passively undergoing the onslaught of modernity. The funeral celebration is like a last defence, symbolically restoring the village unity. Vollbrecht’s analysis, then, does not leave much space for internal conflict, individual interests, people’s own creativity, and competition for status.

A similar narrative of modernity implicitly underlies Owusu-Sarpong’s study of Akan death (1992). She provides a linguistic analysis of texts and visual symbols collected mainly at royal funerals. She argues that words, objects, and ritual gestures are entirely subjected to a ‘gigantic work of persuasion that affirms that the dead are not dead’, the victory of life over death, the myth of Akan survival. Her work provides very rich ethnographic material and an insight into the deep roots of funeral practices in an extensive body of local traditions, concepts and beliefs. Yet her lament that ‘Akan funeral texts and ritual gestures carry in them the traces of a disappearing world (the Akan world), but deserve to be saved from oblivion, because they can still serve as a model for a world that is dehumanised by becoming uniform’ (1992: 39, original in French, translation MdW) does not help us to understand contemporary funeral practices. Such a concept of culture is too static and too closed, and such a view of cultural homogenisation of the world too negative to grasp the creative forces that account for the dynamics of mortuary practices at the grass roots. When I listen to the texts of highlife songs, dirges, laments and eulogies, I don’t hear bluntness or dehumanisation. When observing the numerous people contributing special gifts, a performance, a song, tears or mere presence to the funeral, wearing a variety of mourning cloth and funeral fashion, I don’t see traces of a disappearing world or uniformity. Among the people in Bekwai I have not met any victims of modernisation, merely surviving the destruction of their culture. Contemporary Akan funeral culture is not only very much alive, but also specifically Akan.

Arhin (1994) leaves much more room for current transformations in Akan funeral practices that come with the socio-economic processes of modernity and for the active role of the people in shaping these transformations. Focusing mainly on the economic aspects, he argues that the scale of funeral celebrations has been enormously enlarged as a result of the money economy, improved communication and technology and migration. He argues that the persistence of funeral rites is due to the fact that they still combine various functions in a ‘total social phenomenon’, even as changes occur in the forms in which the ideas underlying them find expression. He sees these transformations as a shift from a predominantly sacred event to a profane one, where concerns of money, wealth and status have replaced religious
beliefs in the performance of the funeral. Although interesting, I think his analysis of change is too much limited to economic concerns. Also in earlier times did exchanges, display of wealth and status concerns play an essential role in funerals. Moreover, at present too, religious beliefs, whether traditional, Christian or both, do frame mortuary practices. Would it not be more a question of scale and form than of a replacement of religion by economics?

Of particular importance is the work of Van der Geest, who did extensive fieldwork in Kwahu. His writings on the image of death in Akan highlife songs (1980, 1984, 1985) will be drawn upon and discussed later. In two articles on old age and funerals (1995, 2000), where he mainly emphasises the aspect of care in the context of the position of elderly in the society, he also states that a ‘secularisation’ of the Asante funeral has taken place, that the emphasis is now more on the social and political than on the religious. It is the prestige that funerals bestow upon the living rather than the care and respect for the dead that explains their present exuberance. Van der Geest’s work is very illuminating and I will make use of it throughout the chapters. I particularly share his view that the way funerals are celebrated is induced more by life values than by beliefs about death. My question, however, is whether this can be understood as a shift in time from a religious way of dealing with death to a socio-political way.

A dynamic approach of death

In this rich body of data and analyses regarding Akan death and funerals, what misses is specific attention to the cultural meaning of recent developments such as commercial services, consumption practices, new technologies and modern media. Descriptions of such developments remain limited to the observation that they increase the cost of funerals and thus the status of the deceased and the bereaved family. Although this financial aspect is of much importance and also constitutes one of the major topics of discussions in Ghana, it is too narrow to come to a deeper understanding of transformations in funerary practices. It surprises me that in descriptions of the ‘traditional funeral’ questions of cultural meaning, symbolism and local beliefs are elaborately discussed, but as soon as one deals with modern forms and Western-derived practices these are taken for granted and local cultural particularities neglected. Why should this be so? It may be due to three implicit, but still persistent assumptions about modernity. First, that people’s encounter with modernity makes religion disappear or at least move into the private sphere away from social, political and economic institutions. Secondly, that modernity in Africa (and elsewhere in the world) would follow the same trajectory as in the West. And thirdly, that Africans are in this process just passive onlookers, victims of modernity encroaching on and destroying their culture. Within this paradigm, modern aspects of funeral celebrations – business, consumption, technology, media – are secular Western institutions and practices transplanted onto Africa and lack any cultural specificity and ritual-religious significance.
This simplistic and Western-centred assumption, however, does not lead us very far in understanding how people at the grass roots transform funeral practices to express new imaginations and create new meanings that come with the process that brings the contemporary world so close together and may be called globalisation. Rather, it is in the interaction between the local and the global that new cultural forms and meanings arise. Asante death is shaped with the materials that have come with Asante people’s encounter with modernity. Even the most ‘traditional’ village funeral is informed by a long history of globalisation (cf. Piot 1999), which includes consumption, commoditisation, mass media, and Christianity. I understand ‘globalisation’ as people’s increasing involvement in global economic, political, cultural, and religious streams of world-wide circulating products, practices, and ideas. Globalisation does not automatically lead to cultural homogenisation or ‘Americanisation’, but it is through the localisation of global cultural streams, that new cultural forms arise and old ones transform. As a matter of fact, local traditions are very often denied time in the same way as non-Western societies have been placed outside history (Wolf 1982). But what is experienced at one point in time as local, has evolved over a long period of time. Local practices of consumption, the use of media, or the purchase of services, as I will show, both come from outside and are at the same time deeply rooted in culturally specific, but constantly evolving patterns of social organisation, exchange, and belief.

To provide insight into how Asante in present-day Ghana shape and give meaning to their funeral celebrations I propose that the relation between the form of the funeral – of objects, actions, or texts – and its meaning is never given, but is created by people interacting and grounded in time and space. The socio-political and the ritual-religious aspects of this interactive process are inseparably connected. Hence, I take a view of death as a field of interaction, providing the ritual context ‘for the meaningful elaboration of identity and diversity [and] the reevaluation of social values and relations that could not take place in life’ (Masquelier n.d.: 26).

I see the ritual-religious significance of Asante funerals not in the first place in religious doctrines or religiously prescribed rites, but in the work of religion as a free space for the dialogue between sacred and profane, between imaginations and worldly reality. This entails a move from a concept of ritual as ‘tightly structured performances of prescribed actions accorded sacred or religious meaning’ (Keesing 1981: 343) to a much broader concept of ritual. Drawing upon Turner’s concept of liminality and anti-structure, I suggest that death and the practices surrounding it offer people a ritual time-space, marked as distinct from every-day routine with its every-day limits, to reflect upon the status quo and to play with desires and imaginations. This space of death is a powerful site for creating memory, restating history and tradition, and negotiating meaning, a ‘theatre’ for staging images. These may be images induced by ideals and desires that are not practicable in daily reality, like those of wealth and beauty, of close unity and mutual support, or of modern lifestyles. But during funerals things are also possible that are not acceptable in normal
life, like excessive drinking, conspicuous display of wealth, public wailing, or rolling on the ground. The dramatic event of death creates a liminal space for staging visions of life that may contrast sharply with the reality of life outside this ritual space. As a funeral never follows a fully fixed scenario of prescribed actions, the images to be created may always be contested and contestation implies strategies. Strategies that people follow in pursuing their interests. This is the socio-political dimension of death and funerals. Studying strategies, then, asks for an actor centred approach in which not the product – the final form of ‘the Asante funeral’ – appears central, but the process – how people get to that form. It is not the rules that tell us how funerals are celebrated, but the strategies. Instead of trying to understand how culture makes people act, we have to focus on how people interact to make what eventually becomes their culture. Rules, then, are significant only as part of strategies: how supposed rules, or ‘customs’, are manipulated and used to legitimise certain practices. The interests people have in funerals are various. Different parties are involved – individuals, groups of people, institutions – and all have their place and history in society. The extended family, customarily the ‘owner’ of a funeral, the nuclear family, churches, community groups, and states all have their images to stage and vie for the appropriation of the management of death. The end of an individual’s life incites competing ways of remembering, of claiming identity, and of assessing meaning. Gaining control over (part of) the performance of a funeral is at the same time a way of legitimising social, political, moral or religious authority. At various levels, then, the ends people seek to achieve in funerals have to do with social relations, power, social prestige and social pressure, conflicts and competition.

In short, I will approach Asante funerals not as an institution present in society to be studied and described, but as a field of interaction, in which tensions arise, discussions and negotiations take place and imaginations are turned into images. Whose imaginations these are and by what means this happens is a question of power. This ‘politics of imagination’ is at work in a series of communicative funeral events, situated in a field of tensions between different ‘parties’ in society. Behind the images of community and solidarity presented at funerals, conflicts, different interests, and power games are played out. The analysis of these events (and of documents, as materialisations of such events) will tell the story, or ethnography, of the Asante funeral.

Ethnographic context: Asante-Bekwai

The place where the people figuring in my story live and the events described took place is called Bekwai. Asante-Bekwai. It is a middle seized town some 35 kilometres, but one-hour drive due to the bad road condition, south of Kumasi, the Asante capital and second largest city of Ghana. It is the capital of the Amansie-West district and counts, according to very rough estimates by some administrative officials,
about ten thousand inhabitants. Bekwai is conceptually and for many also geographically located between city and village. For the people in Kumasi, and especially for urban migrants originating from Bekwai, Bekwai is a backward village. Going to Bekwai means moving out of the city into the bush. The once tarmacked, but now often muddy road full of potholes only reinforces this feeling. But for the people living in the small villages around, Bekwai is where it happens, the site of modernity and the first gate to the wider world. Bekwai is where one goes to get documents and papers, to have pictures made in a photo studio, to bring money to the bank, or to catch transport to Kumasi and further.

Bekwai is built on a hilltop. Approaching the town from the north, from Kumasi, one only sees the pink and yellow court hall surrounded by high palm trees and the high broadcasting mast. You have to branch off the main road to the south, the ‘highway’, to know that here is a lively town. The two main streets, the bus station, the market and the main buildings are close together in the central area and the rest of the town is spread out down the hills. Being a district capital, there are quite some city-like buildings in Bekwai, many of which remind of the colonial past. There are the District Administration buildings, called the ‘ministries’, the court hall, the police headquarters, the Ghana Commercial Bank, and the post office. From the apparently chaotic, but in fact very well organised bus station, trotro’s and shared taxis leave to surrounding towns and villages, Kumasi, and even once a day to Accra.

On Wednesdays, market day, the big market dominates the whole central area of the town, as traders from the surrounding villages flock to Bekwai to trade their ware. A new market, a modern, concrete two-storey building, was being constructed during my stay and was to be the pride of the town. Recently I heard that, three years later, it is still not finished and the market women still spread out their onions, tomatoes, dried fish, spices, and cosmetics on their wooden tables and empty sacks on the often muddy ground.

Situated in the cocoa producing area and on the railway line connecting Kumasi to the coast, Bekwai is a major cocoa distribution centre, were middlemen and agencies buy the cocoa from the farmers and sell it for export. During harvest time the smell of fermented cocoa penetrates one’s nose as one passes the Cocoa Marketing Board or the storage depots down at the railways.

Walking through the main streets one encounters a lot of small businesses. There are many trading enterprises, like ‘Cool Guy’ who sells all kinds of imported and locally produced consumption goods from biscuits and batteries to shampoo, candles and canned food stuffs, or so called ‘cold stores’ selling frozen fish, chicken parts, and meat. Others trade in old refrigerators, second hand clothes and shoes, medicines, agricultural requirements, enamel or plastic wares. At three or four communication centres people can make and receive their phone calls. Telephone at home is a luxury not many people have at their disposal. I always went to ‘Oheneba’ to receive mine, where the girls operating the phones were either watching The Bold
and the Beautiful or sleeping behind the counter. Bekwai counts several drinking bars, some of which get lively mainly in the evenings, like the ‘Star Nite Club’, and some of which attract customers mainly during the day, like Auntie Ireen’s ‘Ghana Bar’, built of wood and corrugated iron sheets. Food stalls on the streets sell fried plantain, yam, and fish and at the few chop bars you can eat local dishes like fufu with ‘light soup’, ampesie and kontomire, or banku and okra stew. Eating regularly in such places, however, is not socially acceptable. It means you are lazy or not properly cared for at home. At the ubiquitous tailor shops, like Wofa Atta’s ‘Onyame na aye’ (it is God who has done it), you can have your material sewed into a dress, at the beauty saloons and hair dressers your hair plaited or straightened, at ‘Kyere me’ (show me) photo studio your picture taken. Carpenters make you the furniture and the coffins you want. Funeral undertakers, video men and sound system rental companies provide the additional services you need. All these activities are concentrated in an area of a few hundred square metres.

Turning left near the end of the main street, you get to the chief’s palace, the abenfie. I quite well remember my first visit to the palace. Armed with my tape recorder, notebook, and, as custom demands, a bottle of Dutch jenever, I arrived at the big two-storeyed palace for my first official meeting with the chief. I almost felt like an anthropologist. Standing in front of the huge gate, I found the place suspiciously deserted. When I woke the man up who was sleeping on a wooden bench next to the gate and asked him whether the chief was there, he looked at me as if nobody could ever ask a more stupid question. It turned out that the palace had been hardly in use since the death of the paramount chief a year ago. Due to a chieftaincy dispute, there was no paramount chief at the time and the kuntirehene who acted in his place did not stay in the palace, but in his own house. He told me later that since the destoolment (impeachment) of the last chief but one there has been a disagreement over who should succeed him. A new chief was enstooled (enthroned), but he was not accepted by a part of the royal family. Therefore, when he died, no new head of the traditional area could be enstooled as omanhene, paramount chief, until the dispute is solved. In the olden days Bekwai was a powerful state, but now ‘there is no peace in Bekwai’, people complained.

A landmark in the centre of town is the big Catholic Church with its towers of corrugated iron, called ‘cathedral’. Because the Roman Catholic missionaries once were the first to come to Bekwai, the roman church is still relatively big here. But lots of other churches are also represented. The Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches, the Church of Pentecost, and the Seventh Day Adventists are all quite big. Beside these there are several smaller, mainly pentecostalist churches, like the House of Faith Ministries, or spiritual churches. When you walk in town on Sundays you hear church singing coming from one or another church at every street corner and you see everybody dressed up beautifully for the three-hour masses. Apart from the large Christian population, about 90% of the total population, there is a small percentage of Moslems. Most of them are immigrants from the northern part of Ghana.
and live in ‘Zongo’, the area on the other side of the ‘highway’. That’s also where the mosque is.

Being a relatively rich area, the Asante Region attracts many immigrants. Bekwai too, although predominantly Asante and according to some people a ‘typical Asante town’, is inhabited by different ethnic groups. Many come from the north and work as agricultural labourers, caretakers, or traders. Others come from the coastal or southeastern regions, like the Fanti and the Ewe. They usually rent a room and live as tenants in compound houses. Immigrants, though sometimes living in Bekwai for generations, do not consider it as their hometown. Your hometown is where your family originates from and for them that is elsewhere. Similarly, people who have moved from Bekwai to other towns decades or generations ago, will still see Bekwai as their hometown and will come home for important funerals, or, finally, to die and be buried here.

On different sides of the town there are newly built residential areas, were it takes people years to build their own houses. Mostly these are natives from Bekwai who have migrated to Kumasi, Accra or abroad and spend their money on a big villa in their hometown, the ultimate and most visible proof of being successful. It was in such a house that I was living during my stay in Bekwai. ‘Salve Regina’ is written in big capitals in the face of the house and before I moved in the Catholic priest blessed it to protect me against evil spirits. It is the house of my mother Joana, with whom I lived and worked during my first stay in Ghana and who adopted me as a daughter. She comes from Bekwai, but lives and works as a nurse in Trede, a village on the way to Kumasi. She invests the ‘little little money’ that she earns in this house, that her father started building eleven years ago, just before he died. Now, Joana’s big pride is almost finished. When I moved into the house, only tap water and electricity were still to be connected.

An anthropologist in the field

In the course of my seven months of anthropological fieldwork I seldom felt like a ‘real’ researcher. But what should that be, a ‘real’ researcher? I was often troubled by an indefinable feeling that I should ‘do’ more. The research I carried out in Bekwai and surroundings was an entirely qualitative research, based mainly on participant observation. Although, after five years of training in anthropology, I had made a well founded choice for such a research method and was convinced of its merits for understanding human behaviour, it turned out that ‘real research’ for me, unconsciously, still meant something like having structured interviews and collecting objective, quantitative data. This surprised me. Apparently, the ‘hard’ methods of positivist science that have theoretically fallen into discredit were still lingering on in my mind.
The aim of my research was to gain insight into funeral practices as part of local daily life. My research method therefore has been centred around the interaction between me as researcher and the people in the ‘field’, what anthropologists use to call ‘participant observation’, practical participation a daily life world of people. But what does the so often taken for granted term ‘participant observation’ mean in practice? The two parts of the term seem to contradict each other. Participation means reducing the distance between researcher and researched; observation implies taking distance. For me the aim of anthropological fieldwork is gaining insight in other people’s ways of doing by learning how to do it yourself by participating. But how can you participate in something you don’t know yet without observing? The basis of learning and appropriation is imitation. This is the way children learn and are socialised into their culture and this is also the way an anthropologist learns. An Asante proverb says *shofo se se abofra*, a stranger is like a child. People often told me I was like a child, referring to the way I did certain things, trying to imitate what I saw people doing. But before you can imitate something, you first have to watch someone else doing it. In order to know how to cook, weed, sit, walk, or carry headloads properly, I carefully watched other people do it, and then tried to do the same thing. This is observation. People also took great pleasure at teaching me, not by explaining, but by having me do things. Tying my headscarf, pounding *fufu*, dancing at funerals or delivering a short ‘formal’ speech in Twi. This often took the form of playfully testing me, evoking great enthusiasm when I passed and hilarity when I failed, but always laughter.

In my experience doing fieldwork means not only reducing the distance between researcher and researched, but going beyond this very distinction to the point that it is unclear who is the researcher and who is the researched. Of course there is a difference in the sense that as an anthropologist I had specific research questions in mind and aimed at reflection and conceptualisation, but the people in Bekwai observed me at least as intensively as I observed them. They carefully watched everything I did, how I did it, where I went, and with whom I had contact. They attentively listened to what I said, and how I said it. Both out of curiosity for my ‘otherness’ and as a way of testing my ‘Asanteness’, they asked me where, what, when, and most of all, why? They discussed their observations with each other, analysed them, and drew their conclusions. And I observed them, listened to them and asked them questions. I discussed my observations with others and had them comment. I was a bit more reluctant, however, in drawing conclusions. Observation as part of the fieldwork praxis is always mutual observation. Observation is part of people’s daily life world and not reserved for the fieldworker. As such, it does not impede participation and can be the basis of an open communication.

Practical participation in the daily life of the people means reducing the distance between yourself and the people you are living with as much as possible. This means adapting yourself as much as you can to local life, and local norms. This, however, has its limitations and can sometimes be at odds with the aim of doing research,
namely to get to know as much as possible about something. Adaptation means doing as little as possible that is not good manners, like sticking one’s nose into everything. This I experienced for example with the events around the dead body prior to the public ceremony, like transporting the body from the mortuary to the house, bathing and dressing it. I already felt a certain reserve concerning such events and as soon as I noticed that my hesitating request to be present evoked any resistance or doubt, I immediately, somewhat relieved perhaps, let go of my plans without further insisting. Participation always has its limits, especially where it concerns sensitive, embarrassing, precarious matters. An Akan proverb beautifully expresses this: *shobo sos nsoa funu ti*, a stranger does not carry the head of a corpse.

But if I did not carry a dead body’s head, then what did I participate in? Participation is in the first place ‘being there’. When I went to Ghana for the first time to work as a volunteer in a village clinic, I did not yet realise that this was the start of my fieldwork. For five months I had nothing else to do than assisting with everything going on in the clinic, from first aid and malaria treatment to deliveries and circumcision of baby boys, accompanying the nurse, Joana, on home visits, practising my Twi by talking with people, going to the market, cooking, washing clothes, indeed, being there. No research to carry out, no specific things to get to know, no interviews to do, my only objective was living with the people and trying to understand a little bit about their lives. Being part of Joana’s family, I as a matter of course participated in the daily chores, in going to church and to funerals, in eating and laughing and quarrelling. It was there, in Trede, that I started to develop what Bourdieu calls a ‘feel for the game’. In retrospect I would say one could have no better basis for carrying out an anthropological research.

When I returned to Ghana in July 1998, however, I hesitated to go and live with my family in Bekwai. I feared a tension between my role as granddaughter and my role as researcher. Being part of a family is very important for being accepted as part of the community, and therefore for an open communication with the people, but at the same time, it restricts your research activities. Eating in other people’s homes, talking extensively with people you don’t know, being in a bar at night – where interesting things may take place – or hanging out on the streets in the dark are all activities that do not fit a self-respecting family. And especially if you are the only white in town, everybody is constantly keeping an eye on you and of course, just those things that are not all that respectable will be immediately reported to your family. ‘Agyapomaa, I have seen your granddaughter drinking beer in the Ghana Bar!’ ‘Adwoa, it’s late, go home and if somebody calls you, don’t answer’, Adwoa, adee asa, *ko fie na obi fre wo a mmua*, my grandmother instructed me time and again. ‘Yoooo’, I always responded obediently and then went to visit someone in town. The next day my grandmother would tell me off. I always had to compromise on what my family expected from me and what I wanted to do myself.

I visited my grandmother, Akosua Agyapomaa, almost daily. We had numerous conversations, in Twi, sometimes about just anything, sometimes about a specific
subject. I ate with her, helped her with the household chores, and witnessed daily life in a family compound house. There were four other elderly women whom I also visited regularly at home to ‘sit with them’ (tena wn nkyen) and chat (di nksmm).

Of course I went to every funeral in town. I visited about forty funerals, burials, and memorial celebrations. Very often I went with Yaa Mansah, my grandmother’s sister, who knows everybody. I dressed in mourning cloth, made, as is the custom, a donation to the family, and took part in the dancing. During the ceremonies and celebrations, but also afterwards, I asked people questions about what was happening and why, about the life of the deceased, and about the family. In that way I tried to get as much background information with what I experienced. People’s reactions to my frequent funeral visits were unanimously positive. At a certain moment a woman told me ‘wope ayie kw paa, nti obiara pe w’asem’ – you like going to funerals, that’s why everybody likes you. Visiting funerals is a much appreciated social act. Appreciated by the bereaved family, because you come to mourn with them, to help them with your presence as well as with your donation, and appreciated by the other visitors because you participate in social life.

In the first week of my fieldwork I started selling yams at the Wednesday market with Yaa Mansah. She is the bayerebema, the leader of all yam sellers. Besides the pleasure that laughing and talking with everybody and being in the centre of activities the whole day gave me, it had additional values for my research. In the first place contacts and friendships. Both the market and funerals are main sites of social life, and most of the market women are regular funeral goers. Secondly, the market is an important source of stories, gossip, and information about specific funerals and family relations. Lastly, spending one’s time at the market is a perfect way of learning and practising Twi. Only a few market women speak English and they are all more than eager to talk. Language, the prerogative for communication, is the most crucial thing in participation. Therefore I spent much time in the field learning Twi.

It is upon these experiences that I base this book. But using subjective experiences as ‘data’ means reflection not only on your information, but also on yourself. This raises the question of about whom I am writing. About the people in Bekwai or about myself? Whose story is it? It is the product of the encounter between me and people in the field and therefore it could be said to be ‘our story’. But in fact it is not one story that I write down here. They are many stories, of many people, and many interpretations, including my own. What I have done is arranging them and reinterpreting them within a broader framework and on a more conceptual level.

The structure I employ to organise my story is generated by the fact that a coherent, singular, commonly shared culture does not exist by the reality of different viewpoints, different interests, and different practices, by the negotiation and manipulation that goes on in the process of creating culture. It leaves room for the inconsistencies and ambiguities of life. Each chapter is devoted to one of the social ‘fields’ that play a part in shaping the funeral. Of course, these fields cannot be separated from
each other as may be suggested by such an arrangement. They are, however, units employed by the local people when talking about the organisational structure of society. I will open each chapter with the description of a communicative event or a document objectifying such an event, illustrating the role and significance of that particular ‘field’. I will put the field in a broader cultural and historical context, analyse its relation with death and funerals, and examine the links with other fields.

In the next chapter I shall start with the field most closely involved in death, the individual person. How is the deceased person during the funeral celebrations, after his or her death, constituted as a person? Conceptions of death and personhood, ideas about good life and remembrance will be discussed here and linked to certain funeral practices. Chapter 2 will be devoted to the family: how does a family constitute and present itself during the funeral that she organises? What are the conflicts and tensions behind the image presented? This is closely related to the subject of Chapter 3, community. How is community created, reinforced or undermined? A funeral is an occasion for both unity and competition. Reciprocity and rows, donations and gossip play a part. Particular attention will be paid to migration and city-village differentiation. In Chapter 4 I will examine the ‘funeral industry’, the small businesses and services that all play their part in shaping death. I will discuss the commercialisation of funerals against the background of the growth of a modern, urban lifestyle of consumption, fashion, and amusement. The fifth chapter will be devoted to the role of the churches in the performance of funerals, to the part they play in the organisation as well as to their voice in the funeral debate. In Chapter 6 I will analyse how the state, that is both the traditional authorities and the national government, influence the funeral practice by making laws and by organising big funerals for prominent people. In the last chapter I will present my concluding remarks and reflect on Asante death and processes of cultural change.