



Representations of Mortuary Beliefs and Practices in Akan Literary Works: A Focus on Edwin Efa's Forosie



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Abstract

Akan mortuary rituals and practices are undergoing rapid transformation due to the combined influences of colonization, modernization, westernization, and globalization. For researchers interested in Akan beliefs and customs related to death and bereavement, it will be useful to be cognizant or aware of the nature and forms of these practices and beliefs assumed during earlier epochs in Akan society and history. For both the scholar and the inexpert on this subject, Edwin Efa's fictional work in Twi, *Forosie*, provides a worthy introduction to the subject, offering important insights into mortuary beliefs, burial customs, funeral rites, and other rituals associated with death and bereavement among the Akan. A major theme that runs through the book is the Akan worldview that failure to properly send off a deceased relative can incur ancestral wrath through sickness, misfortune, or death. A major strength of the book is that it covers some of the rarely discussed topics on Akan mortuary rituals such as *funsua*, *samantoa*, *owufo aduane*, and human sacrifice. Readers of the book will also find it especially useful for the important insights it offers on beliefs and attitudes toward altruistic suicide in pre-colonial Akan society.

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1 Introduction

In November 2008, I accepted an invitation to contribute a manuscript on Ghanaian masculinity ideals and male suicidal behavior to a major scholarly journal. The manuscript was subsequently published in a special issue of *Social Science and Medicine*. Following the acceptance of the invitation to write the article, I found myself immediately confronted with a serious dearth of published literature on traditional conceptions of suicide death in Ghanaian culture. While researching the article, I perused several scholarly and popular works on Akan mortuary beliefs and rituals and have since developed a keen scholarly interest in the subject. During a summer 2012 research trip to Ghana, I visited the Methodist and Presbyterian Bookstores in downtown Accra to browse the stock of books and magazines available at the shops. Here, I purchased a copy of *Forosie*, the book that is the focus of the present article. As an undergraduate college student in Ghana in the early 1980s, I had overheard several references to *Forosie* from academic colleagues but never had an opportunity to read the book. Notably, growing up in Ghana, I learned and gained fluency in the reading and writing of Akuapem Twi, the language of *Forosie*, and so found the book readily accessible. During my return trip to the United States that August, I read the book twice, and made several relevant annotations in the margins. In this article, I explore the portrayals of Akan mortuary rituals and beliefs in *Forosie*, situating the discussion within the broader context of traditional Akan mortuary beliefs and rites (Kuijt, 1996; Iswanto et al., 2018).

In the prologue to the book which was originally published in 1944, the author, Edwin Efa, laments the paucity of Akan language novels, expressing optimism that *Forosie* would help fill the lacuna that hitherto existed in the Akan literary scene. He envisaged that the book would help promote interest in Akan language literature while concurrently providing awareness on aspects of Akan culture. Two essential caveats are in order. First, the author states categorically that the book was not intended as a historical treatise or description of Akan society or culture. Second, although *Forosie* is not exclusively about mortuary rituals and beliefs, there is sufficient discussion of relevant issues in the book for the reader to gain a concrete understanding of major aspects of the traditional mortuary practices and beliefs of the Akans. Given that *Forosie* was originally published in 1944, mortuary rituals, mourning customs and death beliefs depicted in the book, and which are the foci of the current analysis, reflect those extant in Akan society some seventy years previously.

Forosie by Edwin Efa

Forosie is an Akan fictional work that portrays various Akan cultural beliefs, norms, values, and practices in a fictionalized Akan community called Ataara (*Ataaraman*). According to the author, the book is “*Ayesem bi a ekyere Akanfo gyidi horow, nneyee ne amanne bi*” (a novel that depicts aspects of Akan cultural beliefs and practices). The Akans are an ethnic group residing in southern and central Ghana. Presently, they are the largest ethnic group, comprising 49.1% of the Ghanaian population (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). As noted, *Forosie* was originally published in 1944. Even though no published record exists on the number of copies printed or sold, it is noteworthy that by 1968, twenty-four years after the publication of the first edition, the book was in its eleventh print edition, palpable evidence of the book’s remarkable literary success.

Forosie covers several fascinating topics on Akan society and culture, including: (1) a cultural premium on the deference to and respect for elders; (2) libation pouring and libatory prayers (*mpae yi*) (p.12; p.21; pp.31-33; p.40); (3) divination (*abisa, adebisa*) (pp.14-16); chiefship/kingship (*ahensem*); (4) tutelary deities and ancestral spirits (p.14); (5) Akan idioms, proverbs, aphorisms and maxims; (6) witchcraft beliefs and witchcraft accusations (p.18; p.39); (7) outdoorings and naming ceremonies for neonates (pp.19-21); (8) christening of an infant after an ancestral spirit (p.21); (9) slavery, slaves and servitude (p.18; pp.21-24; pp.35-36); (10) fetish children (*abosomma*) (p.30); (11) taboos of a river deity (p.43); (12) the planning and prosecution of wars (p.44); (13) a chief/king’s suicide committed to elude capture during warfare (p.44); (14) Akan origin or creation stories (p.52); (15) Akan yearly calendar and reckoning of days (pp.53-54); (16) Akan festivals and holidays; (17) explanation for Akans’ unique matrilineal inheritance system (pp.63-64); (18) Akan marriage contracting and wedding ceremony (p.65; 70-75); (19) Akan divorce rituals (p.65); (20) propitiation, appeasement and purification rituals (21) destoolment of a chief; (22) installation of a new chief; (23) reminiscential oath taboos (*ntam*) (p.39); (24) capital punishment (p.53); and (25) funeral rites and customs of mourning which follow bereavement as well as survivors’ behavior after a death has occurred (pp.52-53). This article will hone in on topics directly related to death, dying, and funerary rituals.

Extant literature on Akan mortuary rites and beliefs

Scholars of mortuary beliefs and rituals are unanimous in their agreement that significant cultural variation exists among societies regarding conceptions about death, expressions of grief, interment rites, funerary obsequies, and post-funeral ceremonies (Jindra & Noret, 2011; Parkes et al., 2015). In recent years, there has been a steady increase in published scholarship concerning mortuary beliefs and death rituals in Akan society (see Aborampah, 1999; Adinkrah, 2016; Arko-Achemfuor, 2011; Atuobi et al., 2005; Boateng & Anngela-Cole, 2012; De Witte, 2001, 2011; Fosu, 2000; Fosu, 2000; Van der Geest, 2000). Regarding social science research methodology, the majority of extant works utilized structured and unstructured interviews with cultural specialists and other informants in Akan society, as well as direct observations of mortuary rituals in various Akan communities in Ghana (e.g. De Witte, 2001; Van der Geest, 2000), and abroad (e.g. Arhin-Sam, 2014; Dolnick, 2011) as ways of gathering data.

Content analyses of Akan fictional texts present additional data sources on conceptions of death and dying as well as information on mortuary rituals. Scholars of Akan language literature agree that there is a large volume of Akan language works of fiction that portray aspects of Akan death rituals, attitudes, and beliefs (e.g. Akuffo, 1964; Benefo, 1980; Donkoh, 1993; Nketia, 1963; Opoku, 1973). However, very little Akan-English translation exists of this vast corpus of literature. Lamentably, scholars with no access to the ubiquitous literature due to linguistic barriers are missing out on the important insights this body of works holds and offers. The current article focuses on representations of Akan traditional beliefs and rituals regarding death that are portrayed in one such Akan novel—Edwin Efa's *Forosie*.

Akans' conception of death and dying

Part of the narrative in *Forosie* is an extensive discussion of Akans' conception of death and dying as well as attendant mortuary rituals. The context of this discussion is a dialogue between *Ɔpanyin* Brako, the *Gyaasehene* (Chief of Staff) at the royal palace, and a small group of teenage boys working as royal attendants (*nhenkwaa*). The discourse begins when the royal attendants express an interest in learning about the origins of a range of Akan customs and beliefs, including those related to death and mortuary rituals, and asked *Ɔpanyin* Brako to provide answers to a set of questions they posed to him. In addressing the young men's questions about death and death rituals, *Ɔpanyin* Brako acknowledged that Akan (in this case *Ataaraman*) beliefs and practices concerning death was so vast a subject that he would only be able to describe the essential features. He then proceeded to furnish them with information about (1) Akan conceptions of death and dying; (2) the identifiable stages and various events of Akan mortuary rituals; (3) how funerals are organized; (4) the cultural expectations and behavior of survivors after a death has occurred; as well as (5) cultural explanations of why Akans organize elaborate and lavish funeral ceremonies to honor their deceased relatives.

Ɔpanyin Brako asserts that *Onyankopɔn* (God) who created all things was also the creator of death (*Ɔdomankoma a ɔbɔɔ ade no na obɔɔ owu*). He describes death as so powerful that no one, not even the God almighty, could vanquish it. He cites the popular Akan aphorism, “*Ɔdomankoma bɔɔ owuo maa owuo faa no*” to buttress the argument of death's colossal might. Translated, this aphorism means: “God created death but succumbed to death.” In describing the inevitability of death, the author adds that every person's life ends in a grave (*Nnipa nkwa kowie damoa* p.53). Additionally, death is described as a halo or rainbow that encircles all humanity (*Owuwo ye kɔntɔnkrowi a esen amansan kɔn mu*). Anytime one sees the rainbow, one is reminded of the inevitability of death and the mortality of humankind. Further, death is depicted as a non-discriminator, the great leveler, which does not favor any category of persons over another. Death, *Ɔpanyin* Brako asserts, does not differentiate between nobles and slaves (*Owu nnim ɔdehye na onnim akoo*, p.53); it does not distinguish between the affluent and the indigent (*onnim ohiani na onnim ɔdefo*, p.53). Furthermore, it does not discriminate based on physiology—the height or weight of a person is immaterial to the schedules of death; it claims tall people and short people (*Ɔtenten oo, akwatia oo, wɔn nyinaa anammon asia na ɛda wɔn da*, p.53). Moreover, death strikes old people and young people alike. He cites an Akan maxim to bolster this point: “*Ebinom susuw se ɔpanyin nko na owu; ente saa, mommono tew, na guanguan tew* (p.64).” (Some people think only the elderly suffer death; but the green leaf falls, and the dry leaf falls). Finally, he adds that “death is destructive!” (*Owu see ade!* p.53).

Continuing, the narrator comments on the capricious and unpredictable nature of death; death does not give notice regarding when it will strike. While those who desire death may not be claimed by death, those who repudiate or scorn death may be the ones to go today or tomorrow. In describing the nature of death, the narrator further

cautions people against refusing to engage in long-term economic ventures for fear that their deaths may come soon. He cites the case of an elderly grandfather who rebuffed a recommendation to cultivate a new cola-nut plantation. It is important to note that during the Ataara (Akan) society of 1944, it took cola nuts about 10 years to ripen, from initial cultivation to harvesting. The elderly man's reason for rejecting this farming venture was that by the time the cola-nuts matured, he would be deceased. Yet, he ended up surviving beyond the 10-year timeframe anticipated for the cola-nuts to mature. Since he did not cultivate the cola-nuts, he became impoverished and died destitutely. The moral of the story is that since no one can accurately foretell when death will strike, people should engage in productive ventures at all times for their maintenance and welfare (Yu et al., 2020; Tainter, 1978; Pinto et al., 2017).

Death is destined by God

Another theme explored in the book is Akan beliefs about death's origins. According to Akan cosmology, God, the creator of the earth, is the sole author of death, and that the time of one's death is predestined by God. When God has not ordained one's death, one will not die (*Onyame nkum wo a wonwu da*, p.26). On the other hand, if one's destined death was imminent, it did not matter what actions were taken to avert it. To illustrate this point, the narrator provides an example of a professional hunter who, in his determination to evade death, sought divination from a soothsayer to ascertain the circumstances under which he would expire. The diviner stated that the hunter's death would be caused by a bear. Based on this information, the hunter decided that to prevent his death, he would henceforth not shoot at a bear during his hunting expeditions. Several years passed and the hunter never hunted or shot at a bear. One day, he lay in his bed in his bedroom. Parenthetically, the aged bone of a bear he had killed several years before pursuing the divination about his death hung down from the rafters of his bedroom. The bone fell and pierced his stomach, killing him instantly, still fulfilling the divinatory message and predestined prediction that his death would be caused by a bear.

Akan conception of the hereafter

In *Forosie*, Edwin Efa also describes the Akan conception of the hereafter. Akans perceive death as a transition for the deceased. Upon death, the physical body (*nipadua*) of the decedent decomposes with interment. However, the spiritual component or soul embarks on a lengthy journey to the abode of the spirits where it takes up residence amidst other spirits of departed forebears. Akans believe that the spirit land, known as *asamando* or *nseedo*, is in a distant place and that the decedent will have to traverse high mountain ranges, valleys, and another rough terrain to arrive there. Akans, therefore, provide their decedents with grave goods, including money. The decedent will use the cash to pay transport fare and to purchase water and food, as they embark and continue on the journey. The grave goods which are deposited in the coffin include handkerchiefs, blankets, and toiletries, and are called *asiedee*. In a later section of the article, I examine the account of a decedent's punitive action towards her offspring for their failure to provide her adequate provisions for her journey to the netherworld) (Straka et al., 2009; Pitman et al., 2018).

From *Forosie*, the reader gathers that Akans believe that the land of the spirits has structures, features, and organizational characteristics similar to the ones found in the world of the living. For example, *asamando* has kings, nobles, subjects, and domestics. Akans also believe that the spirit of a person who hails from an affluent family in the living world will, upon death, take up residence in an equally prosperous home in *asamando*; correspondingly, the indigent in the living world is also poor in the afterworld. The latter two ideas are expressed in the excerpt: "*Asaman nso wo ahene ne nkoa se yewo yi peperepe. Se wowo ofi pa na wuwu a, na worekoso ofi pa mu; se wote ban mu nso a, na worekoso ban mu* (Efa 1944), (The land of the spirit has chiefs and servants similar to the way we have them on this earth; if you hail from an affluent household and you die, you will take up residence in a good home; if on this earth, you live in the ramshackle house, upon death, you will take up residence in an equally dilapidated house in the netherworld.

Death by suicide

In a related section of the book, the author briefly touches on the Akan concept of suicide (*atɔfo wu*) (see page 52). Among the Akan, suicide is an abominable act and a dishonor of major proportions to both the decedent and their linkage group; it is an unspeakable deed that must be avoided at all cost. Nonfatal suicidal behavior, or attempted suicide, is also considered a cultural transgression, and people who engage in abortive suicidal acts in Akan society

are treated with the utmost contempt (Adinkrah, 2012, 2016). Akans believe that the spirit of a person who dies by suicide is rejected by the ancestral spirits, barred from entry into the realm of the ancestral spirits. In fact, Akans believe that the souls of suicides are incapable of journeying to the spirit world to be reunited with their ancestral forebears. According to common belief, if such a spirit dared travel to *asamando* they would be denied entry, first, whipped by the security guard at *asamando* known as Amokye, who would send them back to roam the earth (Amponsah, 1977). No longer human and therefore unable to return to the land of the living, while also not fully a spirit because of the failure to die a destined death (*nkrabea wuo* or *kra wuo*), the spirit of the suicide suffers a simultaneous rejection by the living as well as the ancestral spirits. They become ghosts, consigned to wandering the face of the earth until the time of their destined death. According to Akan folktales, spirits of *atɔfo* become restive, acting as malevolent ghosts haunting the scenes of their physical death, occasionally revealing themselves to, and frightening unsuspecting individuals who happen to traverse the area that was the scene of their suicidal act. Akans call such an itinerant spirit *samantwentwen*. In *Forosie*, the author writes: *Se wowu atɔfo wu de a, na woadan ɔsamantwentwen nennam asase yi so* (p.52) (When you die by suicide, you become an itinerant ghost wandering the face of this earth). Akans believe that certain religious specialists will need to perform the rituals necessary to remove the spirit of the suicide from the haunting site.

Pre-interment rites

Akan society has elaborate death and mourning rituals. *Forosie* describes some of these practices. For persons who die “good deaths” (e.g. natural death in a ripe old age), mortuary rituals are elaborate, elegant, and ostentatious. For persons who die “bad deaths” (e.g. suicide, drowning death, death during childbirth, death from sorcery or witchcraft), mortuary rituals are abridged, perfunctory, or repudiated altogether. From *Forosie*, the reader learns that when an Akan adult dies, every effort is made to contact or inform every member of the lineage who lives in the immediate vicinity about the death. In addition, messengers are hurriedly dispatched to inform other relatives living afar of the death and when the funerary rites will be performed. In the immediate community where the death occurred, a musket is fired twice to alert and inform community members. The person responsible for organizing the funeral rituals immediately orders alcoholic drinks and other beverages for anticipated mourners and sympathizers who will come to grieve with or comfort the bereaved. According to custom, if the decedent had adult children, the children are responsible for purchasing and supplying the casket for the burial of their deceased parent (Byrd & Monahan, 1995; Brysiewicz, 2007).

Forosie also describes Akan pre-interment rituals, including the preparation of the body for burial. The reader learns that “natural burial” in which the body of the dead person is interred in the soil, is the only practiced form of interment among the Akan. Akan corpses are customarily washed, dressed, adorned, and laid on a bed for mourners to pay their last respects to the decedent. Meanwhile, the bereaved and sympathizers weep, wail and lament as part of the grieving and mourning process. They also sing dirges that eulogize the decedent. The decedent’s wife, sisters, and female in-laws wail unceasingly near the decedent’s residence to bring notice of the death to the public and to honor the decedent. The decedent’s children and their wives are expected to shave their heads as a sign of respect to the decedent and to overtly express the enormity of their loss (Efa, 1944). Those who fail to abide by these customary rites face censure, including ostracism, gossip, and castigations from fellow lineage members and the wider community. The reader also learns that among the people of Ataara, when a person dies, the relatives are expected to observe a fast during the mourning period where they are only permitted to consume cola nuts (*Ataaraman mu de, onipa wu a, abusuafo nnidi; bese na wɔwe*) (p.56).

Funerals and post-interment rites

Forosie contains extensive discussion on the crucial importance of proper interment and fitting funerary obsequies. The author writes that in the Akan society depicted in the book, when a person dies, the corpse is not simply discarded like a dog (*Wuwu a yɛnto wo nkyene se akwagyinamoa? Dabida!* p.55). Instead, the body is treated with dignity, washed, dressed up, displayed, and respectfully interred. Through *Opanyin Brako*, the author emphasizes the Akan cultural expectation that funerary obsequies be well-attended. Everyone who knew the deceased before the death is expected to attend the funeral to honor the decedent and to sympathize with the bereaved. Persons acquainted with the bereaved family are also expected to attend the funeral to offer their condolences. In small towns and villages, all residents are expected to participate in the funeral obsequies. Attendees at Akan funerals are

required to make financial contributions to the bereaved family to help defray expenses that accrue from burial and mourning rituals. Indeed, indicators of the success of an Akan funeral include the number of persons who attend and the total cash receipts realized from donations (De Witte, 2001; Fosu, 2000).

The reader learns that among the Akans, to be denied a funeral constitutes the highest degree of opprobrium. When asked about the significance that Akans attach to funerals, *Ɔpanyin* Brako expresses shock, exclaiming: “A! Owusu, na onipa wu na woanye no ayi a, se na woasopa no” (p.55) (A! Owusu, if a deceased person is denied a funeral, then it means he has been scorned by society). Indeed, Akans deny funerals only to persons who have committed malefactions of the highest order such as suicides, murderers, witches, and rapists. Victims of sorcery and bewitchment and persons who have died from culturally stigmatized illnesses such as leprosy and tuberculosis are also denied funerals (Adinkrah, 2015; Fosu, 2000).

In the discourse on funerals, the narrator emphasizes an Akan belief that a decedent who receives an elegant funeral arrives gracefully in *asamando*, and is accorded a rousing welcome into the spirit world (*Obi wu na woye no ayi fefeefe a, ɔkopue anuonyam so wo saman* p.55). Conversely, a person denied a fitting funeral or denied funeral obsequies altogether, as in the case of persons who die by suicide and other violent deaths, will receive an unbecoming reception in the hereafter. Akans base this supposition on a belief that their ancestral spirits maintain quotidian physical relations with the living, even though the living are unable to see them. Thus, the ancestral spirits are privy to the nature, size and elegance of the funeral obsequies accorded every decedent in the living world. The author writes: “*ayiyɛ no nyinaa, asamanfo no ani tua*” (p. 55) (the ancestral spirits see all aspects of the funeral celebration).

Relatedly, Akans believe that there are draconian consequences for denying a deceased relative a befitting funeral. This is encapsulated in an excerpt from the book which states: “*Se woanye obi ayi annya no kwan asomdwoee so a, etumi ba se ɔbehaw nkyirimma* (p.55) (if a decedent is not given a fitting funeral to facilitate easy and peaceful departure, it may happen that he or she will disturb the living relatives). The punishment for dereliction of duty to a departing spirit may take the form of an illness, financial misfortunes, or even death. On page 55 of the book, the story is related of an elderly woman who died and was given niggardly burial rites by her adult children. According to the story, the woman was extremely wealthy but her greedy children coveted her wealth so much so that they refused to bury her with the appropriate amount of grave goods. During the stage in the preparations of the corpse for interment where grave goods are placed in the casket, her avaricious children could only spare two pieces of her cloth and one trinket. The children appropriated the remainder of her wealth. According to the story, following the interment, the spirit of the deceased woman returned to the home of the children every night to call them, imploring them to return her material possessions or face her wrath. When they did not heed her exhortations, she returned and “called” them all to *asamando*, one by one, to respond to charges of errant behavior, all dying within a short period (Van der Geest, 2004; Stahl, 2013).

Among the Akan, this act of an aggrieved deceased spirit returning to cause the death, illness, or the infliction of other forms of retributive punishment on living relatives is called *samantoa*. Akans believe that their deceased relatives maintain close contact with them and continue to have an impact on their lives, including communicating with them about their contentment or displeasure with their behavior, in the form of rewards and punishment, respectively. In contemporary Akan society, it remains a widely held belief that anyone who fails to follow precisely the wishes, hopes and instructions for the disposal of property made by a deceased relative (*samansew*) will be punished by the decedent.

In *Forosie*, the author recounts another example of harsh retributive consequences for the living for perfunctory funerary rites, in this case involving the failure to demonstrate sufficient emotional grief. The reader is told that a death occurred in the fictional town of Ntoronan. In this case, the deceased woman accused her children of not weeping sufficiently for her. For this reason, she caused each of the adult children to become childless (*obonin*) through sexual impotency or sterility. Among the Akan, the death of a mother is expected to arouse ceaseless, intense grieving, including loud hysterical wailing, uncontrollable sobs, and continual lamentations marked by calling out the name of the deceased mother and wailing loudly during each phase of the mortuary rituals. Adult children of the deceased and other relatives who only cry minimally, or not at all, may be suspected of responsibility for causing the decedent’s death through witchcraft, sorcery, or some other spiritual forces, or simply rejoicing in the decedent’s demise (Adinkrah, 2004, 2008, 2015). In this case, childlessness as a punishment inflicted on the children reflects the enormity of the offense of not mourning a deceased relative adequately. Among the Akans, to be afflicted with infertility is among the gravest of punishments for errant behavior. To be childless in Akan culture is a piteous condition. This is due to society’s pronatalist stance. According to the story, each time any of the adult children went for divination to find out the cause of their impotency or infertility, the answer was the same—punitive retribution for providing unbecoming funerary obsequies for a deceased parent.

In recent years, Akans have been criticized for the costliness, lavishness, extravagance, and opulent display of wealth that decedents' relatives invest in the enactment of death rituals (Dolnick, 2011; Boadu, 2013; Newton, 2014). However, folktales that feature stories of retributive harm against children for providing scanty grave goods or insufficient grieving, may be crucial for understanding the degree of investiture that Akans devote to burial customs and funerary obsequies. If failure to provide a befitting funeral can incur ancestral wrath, including infertility and death, then it is little wonder that some Akan lineages, families, and personages go to considerable lengths to give their deceased relatives the grandest send-off imaginable.

Funsoa (Carrying the Corpse)

In *Forosie*, the author provides a brief description of the now legally-proscribed and rarely-discussed Akan mortuary ritual known as *funsoa* (or *funusoa*, *funu soa*, *afunsoa*) (see Efa, 1944; Brokensha, 1966). *Funsoa* literally refers to "carrying the corpse." Among Akans, in cases of suspicious death, members of the bereaved lineage typically express interest in establishing the cause of death, as well as identifying any malevolent human agency that might have been involved. In pre-colonial times, whenever such death suspicions arose, the corpse (spirit of the deceased) was asked to identify the person responsible for his or her death. This practice was called *afummisa* (asking the corpse), and required the carrying of the corpse (*funsoa*). The corpse was placed in a casket or makeshift gurney and carried shoulder-high by a group of young men preselected for the ritual. These men, usual strangers from another town or village, and expressly hired for this purpose, carried the casket aloft, then proceeded to move through the length and breadth of the community. According to custom, before departing the deceased's home, the *abusuapanyin*, or head of the deceased's lineage, would address the casket bearing the corpse thus: "You X, the decedent. If your death is due to natural causes and this death is your destined death, go peacefully to your maker. Conversely, if someone had a hand in your death, let your corpse move to strike the culprit for all assembled to bear witness." The physical movement of the pallbearers was supposed to be directed by the corpse. If the casket-bearing corpse moved in the direction of a member of the community and struck this person, this was interpreted as an indication that the stricken person caused the death of the decedent. This was often followed by long, cantankerous litigation between the bereaved lineage and the lineage of the person so struck by the corpse, particularly if the alleged culprit denied responsibility for the death. In former times, members of the bereaved lineage would take vengeful retaliatory action to kill the person so identified as the cause of death (Fosu, 2000). If following the enactment of the ritual the corpse did not move to strike anyone, but simply moved up and down or side-to-side thrice, it was an indication that the death was naturally caused or destined by God. The casket was then taken to the cemetery for interment rituals and burial.

Interment rites and post-interment rites

A section of *Forosie* concerns interment rites. The reader learns that the conveyance of the casket-bearing corpse to the cemetery is usually in a procession and is accompanied by the firing of musketry, loud wailing, and lamentations as well as continual weeping by females bereaved by the death and other female sympathizers and mourners. While Akan men are forbidden from publicly weeping or wailing, they can be seen lamenting (*retwa agyaadwo*). At the cemetery, before burial, libation is poured and prayers are said. Guns are fired into the air before the casket is lowered into the grave. The day following the burial, members of the bereaved lineage go into the community to express their gratitude to community members for their assistance in the funerary and interment activities. Following this, the bereaved converge daily in the decedent's house for a one-week wake where they sit and rest, imbibe alcohol and memorialize the deceased in conversations.

One week following the interment activities, the bereaved lineage prepares a special meal for the spirit of the decedent. Known as *owufo aduane* (meal for the deceased), the food is put in containers and placed on the grave of the decedent (Efa, 1944). Akans hold a belief that the decedent's spirit will come to feast on the food left for him or her. Further, lineage members meet to render financial accounts of all the funerary activities. Expenditures are balanced against receipts to determine if a debt was incurred or a profit made from the burial and funerary rites. In addition, a successor is appointed to inherit the material property and assume the non-financial obligations of the deceased. The lineage also picks a day to go and visit the decedent's farms. Besides, a date is selected for the second or grand funeral (*ayi pa*). This second funeral was usually scheduled for the 40th day or the 80th day of the decedent's death (Efa, 1944).

The book notes that in this fictionalized Akan community, during the grand funeral (*ayi pa*), the funeral rites are conducted with all seriousness as if the corpse was still around. Lineage members sit together at the funeral grounds; funeral attendees come to console and sympathize with them over their loss; food is cooked and placed on the deceased's grave; a week later, the bereaved family meets to assess financial expenditures and receipts. If there is a loss, the successor assumes responsibility for the bulk of the debt. If the deceased was a chief, his clay effigy or bust (*sempɔn*) is displayed and carried through each district of the town in the evening of the day of the funeral. The effigy is then placed on a mat and awake is kept overnight. After that, the effigy is carried to the royal cemetery (*nsɔrɛ mu*) (p.57).

Interment of chiefs and human sacrifice

Forosie also describes the cultural ways of handling the death and interment of a chief. The author briefly describes the position of *akrafo* in the royal palace and how these royal attendants are slain and buried alongside a deceased chief during the enactment of mortuary rituals associated with the death of an Akan chief or king. As noted previously, Akans believe that life in the spiritual realm is a continuation of life on this earth and that one's life station in the hereafter parallels one's status in the living world. Consistent with this belief, chiefs and kings on this earth will presumably become chiefs and kings in the ancestral world. In the Akan kingship system, there is the position of *akrafo*, a royal attendant who also symbolizes the soul of the king (Gilbert, 2008). The *akrafo*'s soul is believed to be coterminous with that of the chief. In his position as a royal palace attendant, it is presumed that whatever evil or bad things such as an illness, accident, or another form of misfortune that is to befall a chief will be diverted onto the *akrafo*. For this reason, *akrafo* is pampered. Whenever a chief is carried in a palanquin, the *akrafo* sits in the same palanquin with the chief. *akrafo* is served the same sumptuous meals and drinks that the chief is served daily. Unfortunately for the *akrafo*, when the chief dies, he is slain and his head or entire corpse interred with that of the chief. Other slaves (*nnɔnkɔfo*) in the royal palace are killed so that they too will accompany the chief to the next world to provide the same services they provided him on this earth (Gilbert, 2008).

Altruistic suicide

Akan society impugns suicidal acts (Adinkrah, 2011, 2012). Suicide or self-killing (*ahokum* or *boapawuo*) is considered an abomination against *Onyankopon*, the Supreme Being. It is also a malefaction against the ancestral spirits (*nananom nsamanfo*), the earth deity (*Asaase Yaa*), other spirits of the land, as well as the living. Akans' deep repugnance for suicide is evocative or redolent of the way the suicide's corporeal body was treated in early Akan society. According to Rattray's famous Asante historiography, in pre-colonial Asante society, persons who committed suicide were posthumously adjudicated in customary court, invariably convicted of the charges preferred against them, and suffered decapitation as punishment. The headless torso of the suicide was then jettisoned into a thicket, to decay, or to be masticated by roving wild animals. In addition, the suicide was dispossessed of all of his or her material property, including wives, slaves, farm animals, and products which were forfeited to the state (Rattray, 1969). Concurrently, swift action was taken by spiritual leaders to purge the society of the taint of suicide. It was believed that unless swift propitiation and purification rites were performed to appease the aggrieved deities and spirits of the land and to decontaminate the community of the blemish of suicide, the suicidal death would unleash ancestral and divine wrath upon the community in the form of droughts, famines, pestilence, political unrest, premature deaths and other forms of calamity (Fosu, 2000).

Although early Akan society censured suicide, there was a particular type of suicide that was welcomed, even acclaimed, in Akan communities. This was altruistic suicide. Persons who sacrificed themselves to the society's cause were posthumously honored, their descendants given political and economic privileges and honorific titles. A portion of the book, *Forosie*, discusses altruism and the altruistic suicide of Yaw Forsie, the main character in the novel. According to the narration, war once developed between the citizens of Hwerema (*Hweremmafo*) and those of Ataara (*Ataaraman*). Following divination (*abisa*), the fetish priest and spiritual leader of Ataara, known as *Firaw Komfo*, announced to the elders of Ataara that there was an urgent need for a citizen of Ataara to offer himself to be killed in a ritual sacrifice to guarantee Ataaraman's success in the war. That night, Yaw Forsie offered himself to be killed and sacrificed. When Forsie informed his nuclear and extended family members about his decision to volunteer himself to be sacrificed to the tutelary deities to ensure their success in the war, family members were reportedly indignant. They importuned him to rescind his decision. However, Forsie did not relent. According to the story, he was taken to the fetish shrine, slaughtered, and his body and blood sacrificed to the gods, in the same way

that Akan fetish priests slaughter sheep in propitiation and appeasement rituals to their gods (*Wɔde Forosie kɔɔ Firaw abosompɔw mu kokum no senea enne yi abosonsomfo kum oguan yi mmusu no.* p.117). As ordained by the oracle, the citizens of Ataara prevailed in the war, vanquishing the people of Hwerema with ease.

Naming a child after a deceased relative

An important and enduring Akan tradition is the naming of a newborn infant after a good ancestral spirit. Historically and customarily, Akans have regularly named their children after deceased relatives who lived exemplary lives and died natural deaths. A popular Akan aphorism states: “*saman pa na ye to no abadin*” (we name a child after a good ancestral spirit). There are two primary reasons for this practice. First, the practice is intended to honor the deceased relative and to perpetuate his or her memory. Second, it is designed to imbue the neonate with the desirable traits of the departed relative. Akans believe that a name is impregnated with power (*edin wɔ tumi* or *tumi wɔ edin mu*) and that a given name can shape or alter the character of a person so named. By naming a child after a great ancestral spirit, the child will presumably be blessed with the same virtuous qualities demonstrated by the ancestral spirit during his or her life on earth. We see an example of this in *Forosie* where a neonatal infant is named after a great ancestral spirit. Here, Yaw Forosie, the main character in the book, was named after his paternal grandfather. Yaw Forosie’s grandfather, *ɔpanyin* Wiredu’s father, was called Forosie. During the naming ceremony, the libation was poured and prayers were said. In this libatory prayer, the spirit of the deceased Forosie was invoked to bless Yaw Forosie, the infant, to ensure that he lives a long, healthy, and prosperous life, like his departed namesake (Efa, 1944).

2 Results and Discussions

The present article has explored representations of death beliefs and mortuary rituals in one popular Akan novel. The analysis shows that although *Forosie* is a book of fiction, it accurately portrays several aspects of Akan mortuary customs and beliefs that were extant during the era of Akan society and history when the book was written. Today, mortuary rituals and beliefs continue to figure prominently in Akan culture and society (De Witte, 2002; Boateng & Anngela-Cole, 2012). Indeed, significant changes have occurred in some areas of mortuary beliefs and rituals. These changes can be attributed to the quadruple influences of colonization, westernization, modernization, and globalization. However, the substance of Akan mortuary rituals and beliefs remains the same. For example, the beliefs, attitudes, and values that Akans have towards death, ghosts, ancestral spirits, and the hereafter remain largely unchanged. Death is still seen as inevitable, a natural ending to life and a great equalizer. Belief in life after death persists while death by suicide is still impugned. In the past, Akan dead were buried in the ground; today, natural burial or burial in the ground is still the preferred method of disposal of the dead.

Akan funerals command the same degree of socio-cultural significance that they assumed in earlier epochs. There have, however, been substantial changes in the way Akans organize funerals to celebrate the death of and honor their dead relatives. Under British colonial rule, *funsua* (carrying of the corpse) was outlawed. Another important change has occurred in the area of human sacrifice. In the past, Akan chiefs were dispatched to the netherworld with executed slaves and servants. These serfs were buried alongside these chiefs ostensibly to serve their masters and mistresses in the hereafter. The practice was outlawed by the British colonial authorities. These days, no one, not even chiefs, is interred with their wives or slaves upon death. In addition to the disbandment of human sacrifice, the *funusoa* (carrying of the corpse) ritual is no longer practiced. Akans however believe that even with the proscription of *funusoa*, there are alternative ways for the decedent to communicate with the living in case of wrongful deaths. They believe that in those cases where the decedent’s death was wrongfully caused by another person or where the decedent has some final parting words for a living relative or some other person, the spirit (*saman*) of the decedent can enter another person and speak through this medium. It is believed that the medium will act or speak in a way similar to the decedent while he or she was alive. This will allow the decedent’s relatives to confirm that the medium is accurately speaking for the decedent. This process is called “*saman si*” or *samankɔm* (spirit possession) and Akans will say “*ɔsaman no asi obi*,” (the decedent’s spirit has entered someone) (Fosu, 2000). As recently as January 2015, the Ghanaian media reported a case of *saman si* in which a 12 year-old-girl who was unrelated to a decedent was used as a medium to communicate to family and community members about the circumstances surrounding the death of a 29-year-old man (“Ghost Possessed Girl,” 2015).

Another substantial change in Akan mortuary rituals has been the trend toward abandonment of practices perceived to encroach on individual human rights. The deceased person's relatives are no longer required to shave their heads during the mourning period. Also, in former times, Akan mourners were not allowed to wear bodily adornments like earrings, necklaces, sandals, and shoes during the mourning period. This practice is no longer severely enforced. Also, some Akan communities have banned wake keeping. In many Akan communities, all interments and funerals occur on one predetermined day during the month. This date is set for all funerals and interments that occurred during the preceding month. For example, in some Akan communities, burials and funerals are scheduled to occur during the first weekend of a new month. Also, in many Akan communities, there is only one funeral; the organization of second funerals has been discontinued (Asante & Mazama, 2009; Osafo, 2021).

There is also a trend toward the commercialization of interment and funerary rites. Increasingly, death announcements are made over the air (radio, television, internet, etc.). Dead bodies are kept in refrigeration equipment for days, weeks, and even months while family members make preparations for interment and funerary obsequies. Other important changes have occurred in the area of service to, and entertainment of mourners. Providing food, drinks, and entertainment has become a significant component of Akan funerals and an index for assessing the "success" of an Akan funeral (Adinkrah, 2016).

Another new and emerging trend in Akan mortuary rites is the engagement of professional mourners to assist during funerals (Boadu, 2012). In some Akan communities today, bereaved families engage the services of professional wailers to cry out stridently throughout, or during special vantage points in the mortuary rites. These professional wailers, mostly women and unrelated to the bereaved family, are paid hefty sums of money to lament, wail loudly, or sob hysterically, ostensibly to convey a message to other grievors and funeral attendees that the deceased will be profoundly missed. Some analysts impute a pecuniary motive to the practice. It is supposed that the sorrowfulness and solemnity that characterize a funeral marked by sonorous wailing and lamentations tend to generate larger funeral donations that go to benefit the bereaved family or lineage.

Religious change in Ghana has also impacted changes in Akan beliefs about death, dying, and the practice of funerary rituals. In 1944, when the first edition of *Forosie* was published, Christianity, Islam, and other world religions had not made a significant inroad into Akan culture and society. This has changed; in the 2010 Ghanaian national census, 71.2% of Ghanaians identified themselves as Christian, 17.6% as Muslim, 5.2% as adherents of traditional religion while 5.3% said they did not subscribe to any religion (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). Conversion to Christianity, Islam, and other world religions may have altered people's beliefs about the causes of death as well as the afterlife. Today, in many Akan and other Ghanaian communities, many of the rituals surrounding death are combined with Christian practices. These days, where the decedent is a Christian, the casket containing the body is taken to a church for Christian memorial service.

3 Conclusion

In conclusion, for readers unfamiliar with traditional Akan mortuary beliefs and rituals, *Forosie* offers an especially illuminating discourse on this topic. It contributes to the expanding global literature on death, dying and bereavement.

Conflict of interest statement

The author declared that he have no competing interest.

Statement of authorship

The author has a responsibility for the conception and design of the study. The author have approved the final article.

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