THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF CURRENT FUNERAL CELEBRATION IN GHANA: A CASE STUDY OF BEKWAI MUNICIPAL ASSEMBLY

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ABSTRACT

‘Abusua dofunu’ literally translated as “family loves the deceased” unequivocally explains why the dead is celebrated in an elaborate manner in Ghana. This study revealed that, the longer period of retaining the corpse at the morgue, the introduction of hired professional criers or mourners, varieties of foods and drinks served, the expensive display of gifts by the In-laws of the deceased, high cost of funeral adverts, house renovation of the deceased, the one year and beyond anniversaries have led to the uncontained funeral expenses consequently leading to debt. This places huge economic and social costs on the immediate bereaved families and the society at large despite some economic and social benefits funerals bring. In an attempt to find out the socio-economic implications of current funeral celebrations at Bekwai Municipality in the southern part of Ghana, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. The qualitative method helped the researcher to describe people’s perception, attitudes and beliefs towards funeral celebration whereas, the quantitative method enabled the researcher to analyzed all the cost involves in celebrating the dead. Both structured and unstructured questionnaire and participant observation were used for this study.

Key Words: Funeral, Current, Abusua dofunu, Bekwai Municipal Assembly, Ghana

Introduction

A funeral is an important occasion because it is the time to express one’s condolence to the bereaved family. Ghanaian funerals in general and Akan ones in particular bring people together more than other social events. Funerals provide a spiritual base for ritual practices associated with death and burial. However, art in funerals has seen some changes in the Ghanaian society since the past fifty years due to modernity and technological changes causing a lot of social and economical problems to families and communities. There are a lot of debates surrounding the elaborateness and relevance of funeral celebrations in Ghana. According to De Witte (2003) this controversy has led to a tug – of – war between those who think that funerals benefit the economy and those who think that funerals are waste of money that could have been used to
improve standards of living. Funeral celebrations in Ghana have often been criticized by pastors and politicians as well as in newspapers and articles due to the high expenditure on them. According to Mazzucatoets (2006), funeral celebrations in Ghana require huge amounts of money; aside business, housing and education, funerals are one of the main activities that non -subsistence remittances from migrants abroad to Ghana are used for.

In spite of their extravagance, Ghanaian funerals in fact play important roles in the socio-economic lives of Ghanaians. They increase the revenues of small scale businesses whose goods and/or services are patronized during the celebrations, Arhin (1994). Furthermore, funerals create an avenue for spending which boosts various economic industries in Ghana, present opportunities to build stronger family and societal ties, and create the feeling of belongingness, Azzucatoet al, (2006). Funerals also provide emotional support for the bereaved families and in particular prevent them from falling into depression.

For some decades ago, funeral celebrations to remember the legacy or the life of deceased persons have now migrated from being a simple family gathering with some few sympathizers to mourn the dead during periods of the pre-burial mourning through to the burial, and the post-burial mourning into extravagance, flamboyant funeral rites and to almost a profit-making venture. However, the transformation in the Ghanaians funeral rites had come with a lot of consequences on the bereaved family, the community and the nation. This is demonstrated in the form of time, energy and resources. According to Krishna (2006), high social spending such as spending on funerals in Ghana is likely to bring about poverty or have a negative effect on the finances of people in bereaved families. This research hoped to inform policy makers on the social costs and benefits of funerals to the society. The researcher sought to recommend to policy-makers to enhance the positives of funerals while reducing the costs of funerals. This researcher sought to educate the public about the costs and benefits of funerals so as to make useful decisions on how to go about funeral practices in order to maximize the benefits and reduce the costs associated with funerals.

This research looked at the implications of the extravagant nature of the current Ghanaians funeral celebrations from a socio-economic perspective. The specific objectives of this research is to analyze the Economic and Social costs as well as benefits associated with funeral celebrations in Ghana. In terms of geographical limitations, due to constrain such as financial and time, the study was centered in Bekwai Municipal or traditional area. Moreover, funeral rites are highly influenced by religion. In Ghana each of the three main religious groups (Christianity, Islamic and the traditional region) has its own peculiar way of celebrating this rite. This research paper looked at funeral rites in the context of the African traditional religion. The Bekwai Municipal is located in the southern part of the Ashanti region of Ghana. It has a population of 118,024 (2010 Population and Housing Census of Ghana). The average household size is estimated at 7.1 persons, which is higher than the national figure of 5.2 persons. The economically active population in the municipality is engaged mainly in agriculture (excluding Fishing), with 58.2 per cent of them employed by the sector.
Research Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative research approach were used. Qualitative research was used for this research because, investigating the socio-economic benefits and costs of funerals required knowing people’s opinions about funeral ceremony, cultural influences on their spending behaviour during funerals, and the value that they place on funeral ceremonies. A qualitative research approach was also adopted because this research dealt with analyzing behaviour, opinions and feelings that are hard to quantify. The quantitative method enabled the researcher to analyze all the cost involves in celebrating the dead. The target population was made up of organizers of funerals (the traditional leaders and family heads). One hundred and fifty family heads (150) from the chosen communities (Bekwai, Kwamang and Bogyawe) in the Bekwai traditional area in the Ashanti Region of Ghana were selected as the sample size. For this type of research, both probability and non-probability sampling techniques were adopted. For probability sampling, simple random was used to collect data from the One hundred and fifty family heads from the three communities. Simple Random sampling is one in which each and every member of the population has an equal and independent chance of being selected. The researcher used this method to get the One hundred and fifty family heads (150) whom data was collected from. The researcher used this method because each and every member of the population was given an equal and free chance of being selected. The following methods were employed in gathering data: in-depth interviews (semi-structured interviews), questionnaire and participant observation. In collecting data for this research, two separate sets of questionnaires were distributed to the respondents. For each of the communities, a set of questionnaires was distributed to some bereaved family heads. This kind of technique helped to get a lot of information and positive response from the respondents with regard to their experience on the topic since it guarantees follow-up questions. Participant observation was adopted for the study because when you are involved with participant observation, you are able to observe naturally unfolding worlds of the population under study.

Theoretical Framework for Analysis (Literature Review)

Funerals in the International Settings

Funerals and burial practices are a universal human social experience, and every society has a unique pattern of dealing with the death of its members. Although the fear of death is a universal phenomenon, people in different cultures have different ways of dealing with it. According to Holloway (2002), inmost of the North American countries, mourning is viewed as a private matter. A 2-hour visiting period with the deceased occurs during the wake-keeping, which typically takes place in a funeral home. Mourners are encouraged to control their grief and return to their normal routine as quickly as possible. In contrast, the Black church plays a significant role in the funeral traditions of many African-American communities. Such communities hold long funeral services and tributes, which are perceived to honor the dead and testify to the great
impact of their lives on the living. Bryant and Prohmomo (2002) look at the reasons why village funeral societies in north-east Thailand collect equal amounts of monetary contributions from all member households as insurance for funerals, although some households are more likely to experience deaths than other households. They found that the equal contributions rule adopted by the funeral societies is as a result of their preparedness to subsidize costs for other villagers, for the purpose of simplicity and the need to provide transparency to prevent poor management and corruption.

Funerals in the Ghanaian Settings

Funeral–related research in Ghana has been skewed toward the Akan community. Arhin (1994) investigates the increasing significance of Akan funeral rites and the parallel increase in their costs. He looks at this in colonial and post–colonial situations, and from the perspective of socio–economic and religious changes. He also studied the impact that the rising cost of funerals has on Ghana’s economy. For her part, De Witte (2003) observed how among the Akan people, money and the social representation of funeral rites do not contradict each other but rather reinforce each other. She also observed how the Akan people manage death by using money to negotiate relationships between the living as well as values of life, during funeral celebrations.

Van der Geest (2006) analyzed how the genesis of mortuary use to preserve the dead in Ghana brought about a revolution in the Akan funeral culture, and how this situation merged with the interests of the relatives of deceased persons and hospital managers. He argued that, hospitals have an opportunity to make enormous profits through their mortuaries. He added that, the family of the bereaved also benefits from the existence of mortuaries because it allows the bereaved family to preserve the body of their dead relative for a longer time so that they can inform more people and have a grand funeral in order to gain praise from the funeral guests.

Evolution of Akan Funeral Practices in Ghana

Van der Geest (2006) argued that, Akan funerals which used to be simple events in the past have evolved into extravagant events. He asserted that, the practice of fasting which was observed during funerals in the past is no longer practiced. People now expect to be served with food and drinks at funeral grounds. De Witte, (2003) further explained that in the past, the youth used to run away from funeral grounds where there was traditional drumming and dancing and go to the beer bars to listen to highlife music; now these highlife tunes reign at the funeral grounds.

Contribution to the Literature

While most scholars have used observation in analyzing funerals, this research sought insider view from respondents who have experienced the funeral of a relative, and those from residents of the society where the funerals are held. People who have experienced the funeral of a relative and those within the society where funerals are held gave better responses than people who are
analyzed them from the outside. An insider view may be more objective than an outsider’s view due to the insider’s personal experience with funerals in their community or that of a relative.

**Presentation of Study Results and Data Analysis**

From the findings, majority of the respondents interviewed were males representing 76.0% and 24.0% were females. Males constituted majority of the respondents interviewed because the planning of the funeral which involves the one week celebration, the actual funeral, the forty days celebration and probably the one year anniversary are done by the family heads and elders which are mostly males. With regards to occupation 43.3% were engaged in the formal sector. The formal sector includes those that are employed by the both the state and private organizations who receive monthly salary. 56.7% were engaged in the informal sector. The informal sector includes farmers, artisans, traders, those engaged in cottage industries baskets weavers, soap makers, local distillers etc.

**Economic Cost of Organizing Funerals**

Funeral celebration has evolved over the decades through technological innovations like mortuaries; mass media, etc have given the funeral new dimensions in Ghana. The economic costs involve some spotlight of some items that contribute to the cost of funerals. From the findings, the main resort of financing funeral is through bank loan accessibility representing 36%. Rural banks in Ghana as part of the services rendered to the general public includes funeral loan to deceased families to enable them fund their funerals. This comes with a condition that the donations are sent to the bank immediately after the funeral. The head of the family and another person are also required to stand as surety / collateral. Interest on funeral loans ranges from 15% to 20%. Family members’ contribution as a source of financing a funeral stands 30%. Contributions by sympathizers represented 22%. 12% of the total respondents finance their funeral through the sale of the deceased or the family properties such as land.

From the findings, 42%, 32%, 14%, and 12%, of respondents keep the corpse in the mortuary for less than one month, more than one month, more than two months and more than three months respectively. Much value is put on planning an elaborate celebration and having the body kept at the mortuary enables them to do this. Moreover, keeping a body in the 'fridge' for a long time adds to the prestige of the funeral and the status of the deceased and his/her family. From the research, it was revealed that, the average cost of keeping a corpse in a mortuary for a day was GHS 30.0

From the findings, it could be realized that, 68% of the family heads spend over GHS 2000 on advertisement. Funeral advertisement includes funeral announcement on the various information centers, radio and television stations, the publications made in the national and the local dailies, and funeral posters of the deceased. The wider the publicity the more prestigious and self-congratulatory the deceased family becomes.
From the findings, 72% of the family heads spend over GHC1500.00 on hiring of canopies, chairs, mattresses, and music attendants. Apart from the hiring of canopies and chairs for the funeral, music attendants and groups are also engaged. There is at least one group performing traditional drumming, ‘nnwomkro’ songs, popular highlife, or gospel music, but preferably two or even more.

The presentation of gifts is a traditional gift-giving ritual called ‘adesoa’ which is done by all the in-laws of the bereaved family. From the above table, it is seen that, about 70% of the family heads interviewed attested to the fact that in-laws of the deceased family spend over GHC1000 on gift exchange and presentations. These items are displayed in shops for sale, all packed in golden pots. They include expensive cloths, nicely folded and decorated with ribbons and necklaces. The in-laws of a bereaved family can hire the 'gifts' for a day, after which they should be returned immediately. The amount and the quality of the items, the beauty and skills of the dancer and the vigor of the drummers, attest to the esteem of the deceased, the family, and the in-laws.

From the findings, over 70% of the family heads spend more than eight working days on one funeral. Absenting from work due to funeral has negative implication on productivity and also to a large extent on development. Absenteeism from work brings about an increase from base-level spending to a higher level of spending without significantly altering consumer purchase priorities. When absent from work, people tend to spend more money (their purse strings loosen). 54% of funerals that are organized result into debt. Profits are derived from 28.0% of funerals. These can be attributed to the social status of the immediate children, family, sympathizers and well-wishers. 18.0% of the funerals yield neither profit nor loss. A big funeral acknowledges a person's contribution, financially or reproductively to the family as a whole. With regards to financial burden of funerals, close family members usually spend more money than distant family members. For funerals that do not result into debt on the family members, family members abroad are the main financiers of such funerals hence; bear the greatest part of the funeral cost. Moreover, the funeral is the main event from which the family can gain prestige as a family and therefore funerals have also become large public displays where families show-off wealth and unity in a competition for status. The funeral as a source of family standing seems to grow in importance rather than to decline.

Economic Advantage of Funeral Celebrations

The technological and innovative increase in the quality and scale of funeral rites has stimulated several businesses. Suppliers of canopies and chairs, coffin makers, transport industry, food sellers, butchers, paints trade, drinking bars, photographers and funeral video services and music and dance or cultural groups all have seen significant patronage in their services. The long period in which corpses are kept at the mortuary (table3) has created an opportunity for hospitals to make enormous profits from their mortuaries. Apart from most mortuary centers at the various hospitals, private mortuaries have evolved over the years and are in almost every district. During
funerals, the demand for the above mentioned services exceed supply which leads to the increase in their prices.

**Social Costs and Benefits of Funeral celebrations**

Funerals come with a lot of social cost on both the bereaved family and the entire society in spite of some economic benefits they bring. From the research, funerals result into noise pollution, immoral behaviour, community littering, among others. Another social cost of funerals to the family is that quarreling may occur among family members when the family meets to discuss the costs that the family incurred during the funeral, and the donations that came in. Family heads are sometimes blamed for overspending. This may destroy the harmony and once good relationships that existed among certain members of the family. In the big towns, funerals afford the opportunity for blocking of streets. Visitors to a particular street unaware of a blocked street can run the risk of running down mourners as there is almost always very little warning that a road has been blocked. Intoxicated mourners also make obscene gestures towards drivers and this sometimes lead to accidents.

It was also discovered that, in spite of the above mentioned social costs of funerals, funerals also bring family reunion, dispute resolutions among family members, comfort and happiness to family members. All these lead to strong ties among family members.

**Summary of Findings on Economic Cost of Funeral Celebrations**

The economic cost of funeral begins with when a corpse is taken to the mortuary until the end of the funeral. It includes the mortuary cost, family house renovation of the deceased, advertisement cost, the cost of hiring music attendants, canopies and chairs, presentation of gifts by in-laws, the cost involve in hosting sympathizers among others. Mortuary cost contributes huge cost that comes with funeral. According to the respondents, much value is put on planning an elaborate celebration and having the body kept at the mortuary enables them to do this. Moreover, keeping a body in the mortuary for a long time according to the family heads interviewed add to the prestige of the funeral and the status of the deceased and his/her family.

Another cost that was identified during the research is the renovation of either the deceased house or his or her family house. Families are prestige to impress sympathizers with a well-furnished house than improving house conditions of the living. According to the respondents, their family house is the symbol of their family property and therefore should be freshly roofed, cemented, painted and repaired and equipped with modern facilities such as electricity, new curtains, and other decorations when its member dies. Again families release a lot of money to cater for sympathizers because the deceased family is well praised if sympathizers and well-wishers are served well with varieties of foods and drinks. According to the respondents, a funeral is not only measured by the great number of people that attend a funeral but also how
‘entertained’ they were through good music, and group performances. This perception has indeed contributed to the elaborate nature of celebrating funerals.

**Summary of Findings on Economic Benefits of Funeral Celebrations**

The technological and innovative increase in the quality and scale of funeral rites has stimulated several businesses. According to respondents, suppliers of canopies and chairs, coffin makers, transport industry, food sellers, butchers, paints trade, drinking bars, photographers and funeral video services and music and dance or cultural groups have all seen significant patronage in their services rendered. The long period in which corpses are kept at the mortuary (table 3) has created an opportunity for hospitals to make enormous profits from their mortuaries. It was also observed that, apart from the mortuaries at the various hospitals, private mortuaries have sprung up and are in almost every district. This to some extent has provided jobs in the various communities. During funerals the demand for the above mentioned services exceed supply which leads to the increase in their prices.

**Summary of Findings on Social Cost of Funeral Celebrations**

Funerals come with a lot of social cost on both the bereaved family and the entire society inspite of some economic benefits they bring. According to the respondents, funerals result into noise pollution, immoral behaviors (especially during wake-keeping), community littering among others. Another social cost of funerals to the family is that, quarreling may sometimes occur among family members when the family meets to discuss the costs that the family incurred during the funeral, and the donations that came in. This may destroy the harmony and once good relationships that existed among family members. Again, funerals afford the opportunity for blocking of streets which causes nuisance to the public.

**Conclusions**

The evolution of funeral celebrations has moved from the simple and less expensive manner in which it was celebrated in the olden days to a more complex and sophisticated way. The introduction of mortuaries, professional criers or mourners, varieties of foods and drinks, expensive display of gifts by In-laws, one year and its beyond anniversaries have led to the uncontained expenses on funeral celebrations consequently leading to debts. This places huge economic and social costs on the immediate bereaved families and the society at large despite some economic and social benefits funerals bring. Funeral celebration in Ghana should therefore be seen as a deteriorating institution that needs an urgent attention from authorities.
Recommendations Based on the Findings

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made to the various traditional authorities to address the various issues identified during the research:

1. The mindsets of Ghanaians towards funeral celebration should be changed through education. This education could be carried out by the ministry of Gender and Children Affairs through the traditional authorities in the various communities. There should be renaissance on the act of celebrating the dead. People should be sensitized on the effects of most elaborate funeral celebration place on the bereaved family, widows and the society as a whole. Instead money should be spent on children, the aged, the sick etc; their living conditions should be made better, their houses should be in good conditions when they are alive than when they are dead.

2. Wake-keeping, one year and subsequent years’ anniversaries should be taken entirely out of the funeral celebrations. These anniversaries come with their own cost after most bereaved families have been able to settle the debts that those actual funerals had brought. The District Assemblies together with the traditional rulers can collaborate to institute by-laws to this effect.

3. The corpse should not remain in the morgue for a long period. The longer the period corpse remains in the mortuary, contribute immensely to the high cost of funeral celebrations as this was identified as one of the areas much money is spent during funeral celebrations. The District Assemblies, the Social Welfare, Ministry of Gender and Children Affairs, traditional rulers, etc should collaborate to organize workshops for the family heads who are at the forefront of funeral celebrations in the various communities to educate them why corpse should not be kept in the morgue for long time.

4. Bank loans as a source of financing funerals should be discouraged. There is but one appropriate solution to the family head who stands as a surety for the loan when they are not able to pay back; that is to sell the property of the deceased consequently putting the widow or widower and children in hardship condition. To this effect, I suggest that the traditional rulers together with the family heads in the various communities should set up funeral celebration fund from which family heads can source money from to organize their funerals. This will help the traditional rulers to regulate funeral celebrations in their communities.

5. Hired mourners (professional criers), exhibition of gifts by the In-laws should be completely eliminated from the acts of celebrating the dead. Again, family heads and traditional rulers should be educated by the state through the District Assemblies and the Social Welfare, and if possible by-laws can be instituted to that effect by the local authorities.

6. Funerals are celebrated to mourn and pay respect to the dead. Varieties of foods and drinks served at funeral grounds should be drastically reduced. Therefore the notion of a successful funeral partially based on how entertained the sympathizers were, should be
discarded. To this effect, ceiling of funeral donations can be instituted by the traditional authorities as it is done in certain part of Thailand. This to a large extent will deter funeral organizers from over spending on their sympathizers.

All the above recommendations can be effective when they are enshrined in the by-laws of the various Districts, Municipal and Metropolitan Assemblies. It was found out during the research that, there have been instances where traditional authorities have come out with directives on how to simplify funeral celebrations in certain communities but could not be sustained because it lacks the legal backing of the state.

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Bibliography


