ROMANTIZING THE DEAD: A STUDY OF FUNERAL ANNOUNCEMENTS IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at a critical examination of the semiotics of funeral announcements in modern Ghana. It is the belief among Ghanaians that the dead occupy a prominent place in the heart of the people and therefore everything must be done to maintain a cordial relationship as much as possible. A major argument of the paper is that various forms of announcements: verbal, media, billboards, text message and phone calling, are geared towards just one goal: to make the dead one feel loved.

KEY WORDS: Announcements, Death, Funeral, Romance,

Methodology

In this study both the quantitative and the qualitative methods of analysis shall be employed.

INTRODUCTION

Ghana, the first in sub-Saharan Africa to gain independence, is a country of about 25 million people. The capital of Ghana is Accra with John Dramani Mahama as its current president. The country has ten regions with over 70 ethnic groupings. The major ethnic groups are Akan, Dagaare/Wale, Dagbon, Ewe, Ga-Dangbme, Gonja, Kasem, and Nzema. Funeral rites among these people has for a long time been a topical issue to social scientists.

Nketia (p.1) and Sarpong (pp 20-32), explain that the celebration of the dead in Ghana is an important social event carrying with it certain expectations in the behavior of the individual. This event is a duty call on the bereaved and all concerned. As a result, no pain is spared to make it a special event. Nketia identifies five phases of funerals. These are: i. the preparation, ii. the pre-burial mourning (including wake), iii. The interment iv. The after-burial mourning and finally, v. periodic mourning (op cit. p.7). This paper will focus on the first stage of the funeral arrangement which Nketia identifies as the preparations stage.

This stage involves keeping, maintaining and preparing the body for state viewing. Nketia explains that in old Akan societies, this stage begins as soon as the individual dies or in some cases a day after the individual dies. This was at a period when there were no morgues and other means of preserving corpses. In effect, the preparation of a corpse was done behind closed doors and at an atmosphere of calmness since excessive wailing will attract the attention of outsiders. While the body is thus being prepared, messengers are sent to inform relations and all concerned in the town or village and even those outside the town and village of the death. If the person is one who holds a title in the town or village, the chief and queen mother are informed, though in most cases they may not attend the funeral (Nketia p. 7). This used to be the norm for announcement at the preparation stage of the burial rites for the dead.

The central argument of this paper is that announcements of death in 21st century Ghana has taken on such a sophisticated nature that these announcements seem to be competing with one another for attention.

On the grand nature of Ashanti funerals (and for that matter funerals in Ghana), Gott
(2007) concurs with Sarpong that it elevates the status of the deceased not only in the ancestral world but also gives indication of a good life led. As a result, much money is pumped into it to ensure its success. Gott asserts that various regulations by authorities to curtail such extravagance have gone unheeded.

The significance of this paper is to create awareness on the positive and negative consequences of such exotic funeral announcements and point the way forward i.e. whether it should be continued or discouraged in our society. Additionally, it aims at exposing the sophisticated nature of funeral announcements and, if possible, provide suggestions to help curtail/manage the expenditure. As a result, the questions to ask are, first, what go into a funeral announcement? Second, what are the various means or forms of announcements? And finally, based on the findings, should the trend be encouraged or discouraged?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In undertaking a research of this nature, it’s imperative to look at what constitutes funeral announcements. Afful (2012) explains death announcement as a paid for advertisement of a person’s death. On the structure of funeral announcements, Harold et al. (2009) state five moves which obituary writers must use. These are first, “announcement” which should be made up of two basic pieces of information: name of the deceased and the cause of death, it is suggested that this particular column be written in a single sentence. The second move is biographical information, which should include date and place of death, schools attended, notable awards received and important hobbies. The next, which is the third move, is “survivor information” which they advocate should be people who survive or share in the inheritance of the deceased. This should also be coherently written like, immediate family members i.e. spouse, children, parents, siblings, step-children) then secondary family members i.e. aunts, uncles, grandchildren, close cousins. They admonish that baptismal names of relatives should be used and alias or nick names be put in quotes. The list of deceased relatives must be preceded by “the late”. The fourth move is “scheduled ceremonies” which is a note of where and when notable ceremonies like wake, graveside burials and memorial services will take place. The fifth and last move is a note of where people can make donations.

Watson (2008) advocates four moves in writing an obituary. These are, one, the introduction which should be made up of the name, age, date and place of death as well as cause of death. Two, biography which should also be made up of the bio-data of the deceased; information on parents, organization in which the deceased was, things they enjoyed doing and significant challenges they faced. Three, the list of surviving relatives which Watson recommend should be in an order like spouse, children and their spouse, siblings, number of grandchildren, cousins, friends and co-workers. The move number four should be segmented as “additional information” column which should indicate place and time of wake and address of where donations, condolences and gifts can be sent. With this background, we now turn our attention to the findings of this paper.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In analyzing the various forms of announcing the dead in Ghana, seven (7) moves were identified. The first is the banner headline/caption which is made to stand out by the various fonts and writing styles. In every announcement this part is the first to be seen. It is coined in interesting terminology or phrases to exhibit the degree of love or fondness for the dead. Many factors go into choosing a headline: the age at which one dies, manner of death, worth, et cetera. These captions include: what a shock, obituary, home call, call to transition, gone too soon, glorious transition, a life well lived, called to a higher duty etc. It is either gone too soon or what a shock when the deceased is a youth perhaps between the ages of 20-45. It is either obituary, home call, call to transition or glorious transition when the deceased is 45 years and above. If the deceased is rich, educated and between the ages (relatively lives are short in Ghana) of 65 and above he/she will earn either a life well lived, or call to glory. One who is highly perceived to be religious earns heavenly call. This is based on the Christian belief that the dead go to live with their maker in heaven, the abode of God. Afful also identifies the caption as the first move in writing death announcements in Ghana.

The second, identified in this paper as Chief Mourners Enclave (CME), is obviously a Ghanaian accolade for those in charge of the
funeral. Interestingly, Afful captures the second move as a “list of family members and other organization/institutions”. It must be emphasized that no newspaper death announcement captures the above mentioned as a move but they are always titled as chief mourners for specific reasons. A chief mourner should not necessarily be a kinsman of the dead. In most cases, they are heads of institutions in the village or family. These includes paramount chiefs, village heads or family heads, and in some cases, parents and spouses of the dead. The position of a chief mourner is borne strictly by one’s status in the community and not monetary. Their names are listed numbering about fifteen to twenty (15-20). Attached to each name is either the position or job title of the person. For instance, Mr. John Barfoe (Accountant, Tee Company Ltd. Accra), Madam Mary Alido (business woman, Styles multimedia, UK) and on, and on, the list goes. The attachment of job position and place of residence to the name is a vital part of the romance; in fact, a form of embellishment, to show the prominent people or family which the deceased comes from. As a result, when there are no prominent members in the immediate family of the deceased, far away relatives or prominent people in the community are consulted so their names will make the list ‘Kamakama’ (literally meaning, ‘nice and beautiful’).

The third move also termed in this paper as Family Cliché (FC), comprises phrases that the family deems appropriate to announce their dead one with. They come immediately after the CME, though Afful considers this part a pact of the second move. I believe they are different and cannot as such be made a part of the second move which is especially dedicated to the chief mourners. Here, one can read phrases such as:

…announce the death of their beloved….
…announce the sudden death of their Beloved…,
…announce the call to glory of their beloved…
…regret to announce the Home call of their beloved…etc.

The fourth move on the list is the Multiple Names Syndrome (MNS). So termed; the multiple names Syndrome because it is as though every Ghanaian assumes an ‘alias’ upon his/her death. These “aliases” are not the same as the nicknames rather they are the traditionally given names of the individual. Wikipedia explains a nickname to be a usually familiar or humorous but sometimes pointed or cruel name given to a person or place, as a supposedly appropriate replacement for or addition to the proper name. As such, it is not surprising to find the name of the deceased written mostly in capitals, bold, or deeply underlined like:

Madam Yaa Boaduwaa, a.k.a (also known as) Aunti Yaa Yaa,

Mr. Kwame Peasah a.k.a Kwakwa

The fact is that, in Ghana, it is common to find people say that at work or school I’m called Gloria Mensah but at home I am called Takyiwa, as a result, when such a person dies, it will not be surprising to read ‘Gloria Mensah’ a.k.a Takyiwa. This unfortunate situation is borne out of the colonialist mentality in which the African was taught to reject everything African including his native name or identity when in ‘civilized’ places like schools or even churches. In effect, our African identities have been limited to the use of pet names.

The fifth move is the announcement of the place of death cum what is here termed Life Time Portrait (LTP). The place of death may read as:

…whose sad death occurred at her residence on the … .
… whose sad event occurred on … at the Korle Bu Teaching Hospital

(or whichever hospital or place is involved)

We are not a picture-loving society. The reason is because hardly does one see a typical Ghanaian taking photos for pleasure as is done in other societies. Yet, an interesting feature of this fifth item is the display of portraits of the dead. For whatever reason we have come to accept that when we die, the best of our photos should be displayed. There are stories of families who forcibly took the picture of the dead to display- because he / she did not take any photo when alive. These pictures may at times be full or portraits i.e. having only the face.
The sixth move is the Family Tree Portrait (FTP). The family tree portrait spells out the entire family of the dead one. There have been cases when family members lobby or quarrel to have their names appear at this section of the announcing bill. This section contains the names of spouses, children, grandchildren, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunties, cousins, nieces, and nephews. The caveat or rule is that every name that appears on the announcing bill must have attached residence and place of work. So it is not surprising to find some of the names from the CME repeated.

The seventh and final move is the funeral arrangement (FA). This contains subtitles such as: lying in state, burial service, interment, final funeral rites and thanks-giving service. Here families take the pain in directing the general public to where and when the various rites are taking place. One should not forget that directions in Ghana are one of the most interesting encounters in our society. The above noted, though not legal, has become conventions for announcing the dead.

**Semiotics of Ghanaian funeral announcements**

Having considered the seven moves involved in funeral announcement we shall now consider semiotics of announcing/romancing the dead: Verbal i.e. traditional, Media-radio and television, billboards, posters, handbills and telephone use. In doing this, the study shall not at this stage concern itself with the structural elements in the just mentioned signify as discussed under findings. Rather the semiotics are regarded as codes of symbolism for funeral announcements.

**Verbal (i.e. traditional) Announcements**

The face-to-face announcements used to be the norm or cultural style of informing others about death. There are two ways of doing this: town crier and family delegation.

Previously, the town crier (or gong beater) was paid to announce to the entire village the death of a person. He undertakes this duty mostly either at dawn or in the night.

Beside the above, there is the tradition whereby a family delegation or messenger is sent with accompanying drinks i.e. alcoholic drinks, to inform relations and all concerned about the death of a beloved one. This is particularly among the Akans in Ghana. The significance of the alcoholic drink meant two things, one, to inform and, two, to invite to be a part of the final funeral rites. After making known their mission, the drinks are left behind. The strong liquor presented for the announcement of the funeral is supposed to be used for prayers to the ancestors on behalf of the dead one and for that matter should not be anything beside strong liquor. But these days, traditionally, when people go to inform others about death, various alcoholic drinks are used. These include schnapps, whiskey, beer, baileys, etc., depending on the status of the dead and indeed, the status of the one being informed. Suppose a drink like Bailey’s Irish Cream (a relatively expensive drink in Ghana) is used to invite one to a funeral, it is expected that at the funeral such a person shall donate an equal sum of money towards defraying the cost of the funeral rites. Sarpong asserts that while some refuse to accept the drink to avoid having to pay huge donations, others refuse to pay some amounts of money since the drink given them does not merit it (p. 31).

**The Media: Radio, Television and Newspaper announcements**

The place of radio and television in our society cannot be overemphasized. Prior to their advent, the society dispersed its news and information by means of delegations, drum and gong-gong. At the same time entertainment took on a different form when radio and television were nonexistent in Africa. The advent of radio and television has made announcements, entertainment and even education far easier in our communities obviously, than before. Through their usage, relations far away who have access to these devices can easily get information which otherwise could not have reached them early or at all. These days, the media, too, have become common avenues for romanticizing the dead.

Currently, there are over 150 radio stations, about eight television stations and innumerable volumes of newspapers in Ghana. In each case, the basis for receiving announcements is primarily on popularity. As a
result, one can easily point at Peace FM, Hot FM, Asempa FM, Gtv, Tv3, Metro Tv, Daily Graphic and Daily Guide as champions in this venture.

For instance, in the Daily Graphic of Monday, February 20th, 2012 edition No. 18771, pp. 56-60, one could count as many as twelve funeral announcements, six of them announcing fresh funerals while the other six were memorial announcements. In the newspaper announcement, one can expect to see all the seven moves of funeral romance clearly printed. In some cases, some families or people rent a full page to display their romance. It is normally the house style of a media house that determines the specific pages in a newspaper that should be assigned to funeral announcement. For instance, the last but one pages of the Daily Graphic are assigned for this role.

The radio announcement of the dead obviously is read. These are mostly done on Thursdays and Fridays since most funerals are held on Saturdays. The announcements are mostly done with solemn background music to evoke the mood. A feature about this is that some parts of the seven moves are omitted. This however depends on the amount of airtime per announcement paid for, beside the number of times it is to be read.

Television announcement usually comes with all the seven ‘commandments’ of funeral romance because of its audiovisual nature. Like that on radio, it is read accompanied with a solemn music background.

Billboard announcements

On a journey from Accra to Kumasi, the billboards announcing the dead are innumerable. One feature about these billboard announcements is the enlarged picture of the deceased. Once, on a journey to Kumasi to attend a conference, I saw the picture of my former history lecturer from Cape Coast University. At first, I was confused as to whether he was contesting for the parliamentary seat of Konogo Odumase or what. But on a closer view, saw the caption, *Obituary*, and my response, was a silent ‘wow! These posters now seem to be in vogue. A distinctive feature of these billboards is that unlike the other means of romance these have just the caption and date. Several factors go into determining the sizes of these boards; chief among them is the economic status of either the deceased or the family.

Posters

Posters are nowadays pasted on almost everything. Walking along the streets and alley of our towns, cities and streets, one is bombarded with these posters and though not much given attention by the sanitation authorities, they are one of the chief agents of filth in our country. Like the billboards, the sizes of these posters are determined by the economic status of either the deceased or the bereaved. And again, the posters afford the family the opportunity to adhere to the seven moves, which they religiously employ.

Handbills

Handbills and posters go hand in hand in the sense that they are both made with the same technology. They are given to friends and sympathizers who it is believed, may attend the funeral. Though, specially made smaller in sizes, they also accord the family the opportunity to display fondness by adhering to the seven moves of funeral announcement.

Telephone

The telephone which is widely believed to be perhaps the best, fastest and easiest means of communication, has not been left out of the romance. Gone are the days when the mobile phone used to be the preserve of the ‘nouvea riche’. Friends and relations now call one another to inform them of the death of a beloved one sometimes even before the deceased breathes his last. In some cases, text messages are used.

The above-mentioned: verbal i.e. face-to-face, media (radio, television and newspaper), billboards, posters, hand bills and telephone, are the means of announcing death in Ghana. It is interesting to note that some families actually use all the seven identified means to announce / romance their dead.

**CONCLUSION**

In this paper we have so far been able to establish that every funeral announcement in Ghana has seven segments. Also, the various semiotics of romanticizing the dead in Ghana have been
identified. The final and crucial part to this work has to do with whether the above identified trends should be encouraged or discouraged.

It is generally asserted that, “a nation that does not honour its heroes is not worth dying for”, yet, as Ghanaians, we have not yet come to appreciate the living as much as we do the dead. The above discussed semiotics of announcing the dead are not bad in themselves, the Akan proverb: ‘Nea ade wo no na odie, nnye nea ekom di no (literally meaning, he who the cap fit wears it, not the expectant one). Although, too much money is sometimes unnecessarily spent on funerals, they do have their advantages as well. For instance, most people work hard and look after their families so that when they die, their families will give them befitting burials. In any case, the quality of one’s lifestyle will warrant the degree of romance after death.

Since these means of announcing the dead are in vogue, miscreants have also developed means of assessing which funerals would be sophisticated and therefore worth attending. This they do by checking on the jobs and residences of the children of the deceased; if the announcement includes at least two mentions of London, Germany or USA, then it means it is a funeral worth attending even if uninvited. In any case, the announcements end on the clause: “all are cordially invited”.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The above notwithstanding, the following are hereby recommended:

First, insurance companies should educate and encourage people to save towards their funerals. This they can do by rolling out flexible and accessible future funeral expenses.

Second, the commission on civil education and the appropriate authorities will have to enlightened people to for instance, write down details of their funeral preferences before the unexpected happens. These recommendations, though few will help alleviate the burden on surviving relatives.

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The names mentioned do not have any bearing to persons either dead or alive. They are all fictional.


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About the Author

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