

## Culture

# The Economics of Death and Funeral Celebration in a Ghanaian Akan Community

George J. S. Dei



Volume 9, numéro 1, 1989

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1080892ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1080892ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

### ISSN

0229-009X (imprimé)

2563-710X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Dei, G. (1989). The Economics of Death and Funeral Celebration in a Ghanaian Akan Community. *Culture*, 9(1), 49–62. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1080892ar>

### Résumé de l'article

Cette étude examine les aspects économiques de la mort et des célébrations funéraires dans la ville Akan de Ayirebi, près d'Akyem Oda, dans le sud-est du Ghana, illustrant l'étendue des responsabilités sociales dans une société stratifiée qui possède une forme mixte de propriété terrienne. Elle montre comment une institution traditionnelle fonctionne comme réponse efficace à la malchance, en adoucissant les difficultés des segments les plus pauvres de la population tout en permettant aux capitalistes locaux d'affirmer leur statut social et leur prestige. Un examen du processus que comportent la préparation du mort, l'enterrement et les rites funèbres, et une étude de la division des ressources de production après la mort du propriétaire, révèlent une division minutieuse du travail ainsi que les coûts et bénéfices économiques et des bienfaits au sein de la famille du mort, de la lignée et de la communauté.

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1989

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

**Érudit**

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

# The Economics of Death and Funeral Celebration in a Ghanaian Akan Community

George J. S. Dei  
University of Windsor

This study examines the economic aspects of death and funeral celebration in the Akan town of Ayirebi, near Akyem Oda, in southeastern Ghana. It illustrates the extent of social responsibility that exists in a contemporary stratified society that has a mixed form of property holding. It shows how a traditional institution functions as an effective response to socioeconomic stress, alleviating the hardships of the poorer segments of the population while allowing local capitalists to assert status and prestige. The examination of the processes involved in the preparation of the corpse, burial and observance of the final funeral rites, as well as what happens to productive resources after the owner's death, shows an elaborate division of labour, and economic costs and benefits within the bereaved family, the lineage and the wider community.

*Cette étude examine les aspects économiques de la mort et des célébrations funéraires dans la ville Akan de Ayirebi, près d'Akyem Oda, dans le sud-est du Ghana, illustrant l'étendue des responsabilités sociales dans une société stratifiée qui possède une forme mixte de propriété terrienne. Elle montre comment une institution traditionnelle fonctionne comme réponse efficace à la malchance, en adoucissant les difficultés des segments les plus pauvres de la population tout en permettant aux capitalistes locaux d'affirmer leur statut social et leur prestige. Un examen du processus que comportent la préparation du mort, l'enterrement et les rites funèbres, et une étude de la division des ressources de production après la mort du propriétaire, révèlent une division*

*minutieuse du travail ainsi que les coûts et bénéfices économiques et des bienfaits au sein de la famille du mort, de la lignée et de la communauté.*

Among West African peoples funerals are elaborate social and ceremonial occasions. Ethnographic accounts of traditional societies point to the large-scale, expensive funeral celebrations among the Akan of Ghana (Rattray, 1927:101-191); the Fon of Benin (Herskovits, 1967:352-402); the Mossi of Burkina Faso (Skinner, 1964:49-59); and the Yoruba of Nigeria (Bascom, 1969:65-69)<sup>1</sup>. The funeral festivities of these societies consist of prolonged periods of mourning, feasting and drinking. The major activities associated with the funeral celebrations stem from the West African concept of the universe, in particular a belief in life after death<sup>2</sup>. Death ties the community together and expresses one's membership in it. There is a widespread belief that going to a funeral will help the deceased achieve paradise (see Cohen, 1967:72, for the Kanuri of Bornu, Nigeria; and Little, 1967:135-9, for the Mende of Sierra Leone). It is considered most disgraceful if a family does not display some wealth in connection with the funeral ceremonies of a deceased member. Among the Ewe people of Ghana for example, some families "... frequently reduced them-

selves to poverty or even enslaved themselves or their children in order to conduct the rites with sufficient pomp" (Ellis, 1965:160). An elaborate and expensive funeral normally confers prestige on the bereaved family. Therefore, sufficient time, money and effort are spent making the necessary preparations to carry out the funeral rites in a 'proper' style (Herskovits, 1962:192; Forde, 1962:89-123).

In most traditional communities, funeral expenses were apportioned among all adult members of the bereaved family. Other community members made gifts to assist particular individuals of the bereaved family in paying their share of the funeral expenses (Ffoulkes, 1908:154). The gifts could be in the form of food, livestock, drinks and/or money, and were indicative of the bond of solidarity, as well as goodwill and courtesy to the bereaved family and the deceased. Other societies have been known to rely on traditional benevolent societies to assist in defraying the huge cost of burying the deceased. Among the Yoruba, for example, the *esusu*, a benevolent society which functioned as a credit institution, an insurance company and a savings club, paid for the funerals of its members and occasionally made cash loans to other bereaved families to cover their funeral expenses (Bascom, 1952:63-70). The company (or benevolent society) funerals (Ffoulkes, 1908:158-9) among the Fante of Ghana also provided mutual aid and financing for the funeral of a group member. The death of a titled person (e.g., chief) was very much a state or community affair. Ghanaian historical records show that in pre-colonial times, among the Akan, the death of a major traditional ruler led to the state's extraction of death duties (*amantoo*) from its tributaries (Arhin, 1974). In other West African communities, local leaders could impose taxes on their people to recoup some of the funeral expenses of a dead ruler (see Herskovits, 1967:352-70; Skinner, 1964:58).

### *The Study Community*

Ayirebi is a farming community of about 4,300 people belonging to the Twi-speaking Akan subgroup, the Akyem. It is located in the forest zones of southeastern Ghana, about 45 kilometres from Akyem Oda, and nearly 180 kilometres north of the Ghanaian capital, Accra. Nearly 90% of the adult population of this town depend on farming for their livelihood. They produce both subsistence crops and cash crops for sale in the major Ghanaian urban centres of Akyem Oda, Akyem Swedru, Koforidua and Accra. The local staples are plantains, manioc,

maize, cocoyams, yams, rice, tomatoes, pepper, okra, onions, and eggplant. Cash crops such as cocoa, kola nuts and palm oil are produced on a limited scale. Other traditional economic activities engaged in by the people include the hunting and gathering of wild forest resources, the raising of livestock, and arts and crafts. The subsistence farming economy is well articulated with a market economy and/or wage labour. Members of a household share farming activities, working together on land acquired through the matrilineage, the custodian of the stool (i.e., village chief or sub-chief, or individuals' personal efforts (i.e., outright purchase) (see Dei, 1987). During periods when agricultural work intensifies (e.g., preparation of the land for farming, or harvesting of farm produce), households hire wage labourers or request the assistance of available family labour. The principal methods of farming are shifting cultivation on bush farms and intensive cultivation of gardens and farm plots closer to homesteads.

The Ayirebi rural adaptation survived the national crisis of the early 1980s that was triggered by world recession and aggravated by the socio-environmental stresses of drought, bush fires and the return of over a million Ghanaians from Nigeria. The people continued to produce enough foodstuffs to feed themselves and the external markets. There was a resurgence of the exploitation of traditional resources (e.g., hunting and gathering) and the making of rural handicrafts. This occurred at a time when economic conditions at the national level became extremely difficult for a majority of the population, especially urban dwellers (see Dei, 1988). There was also a building and maintenance of strong social relations among community members. A strong sense of mutual aid and the sharing of responsibilities within households and to some extent among members of the wider community, were effective local strategies enabling the people to cope with stress. During times of hardship traditional redistributive networks in the community expanded. The extent of community interdependence, solidarity and social responsibility is best exemplified in funeral celebrations and inheritance arrangements.

### *Methodology*

With the exception of the annual "Odwira" or New Yam festival, funerals are the most elaborate of the ceremonial occasions in the Ayirebi community<sup>3</sup>. This is true whether measurement is in terms of attendance, the time taken for preparation and celebration, or emotional and economic costs generated

(see also Goody, 1962). There are differences and variations in the organization of funerals reflecting the status, sex, and age of the deceased, as well as the circumstances of death. Rites held for children and adolescents are not elaborate. Persons who died a normal or natural death receive a more elaborate funeral ceremony than those whose deaths are the result of suicide or the alleged curse of the gods (i.e., those judged evil persons). Owing to their sacred role as community ancestors after death (see also Rosenblatt, 1976:121; Nketiah, 1969:5), in scope, scale and content royalty are accorded a different form of burial rites from commoners.

This study discusses the general pattern of funeral ceremonies organized by bereaved families and lineages in the community. It was conducted using the traditional anthropological methods of participant and non-participant observation. Statistical data was kept on all of the twenty-one funerals held in the community during the research period. These deaths occurred within a three-year period (1980-1983). Of the twenty-one deceased, fourteen died as local residents and seven died outside the community. Three of these seven were actually Ayirebi citizens whose deaths occurred while the individuals were temporarily outside the community. The remaining four can be described as non-citizens who had family roots or connections in the town. The main burial and final funeral rites of these individuals had been held in their respective hometowns and villages, but they were accorded secondary funeral ceremonies in Ayirebi by their relatives in order to recoup some of their expenses. The funerals for the fourteen citizens whose deaths actually took place in the town, and the three Ayirebi citizens who died outside the community, were subjected to detailed study. These seventeen people included 10 males and 7 females and their average age was 48.5 years. The key factors examined were economic costs, duties, and responsibilities, and the rights to property that followed the deaths<sup>4</sup>.

### *Death, Burial and Funeral Rites*

In discussing funeral ceremonies, a distinction must be made between the day of burial itself, and the weekend of the final funeral rites (see Warren, 1973:19; Herskovits, 1967). The death and funeral rites of an individual are not the concern of his or her family and lineage alone. The event has enough implications (social, religious, political, and economic) for the wider community to warrant the total population's active participation in the ceremonies

that take place (Huntington and Metcalf, 1979). Upon the death of an individual, a member of the deceased's household first notifies the head of the segment of the bereaved matrilineage, usually the *wofase* (mother's brother) or *abusuapanyin* (lineage head), as well as the *obaapanyin* (senior woman of the lineage). The lineage elders then send a messenger with drinks to inform the town chief of the death and request his permission to mourn. At a meeting of the lineage elders, which other lineage members may attend, burial arrangements are made and the raising of an initial capital outlay is discussed. The local chief is then informed of the preparations for the burial and the burial date, which can be any day of the week except Wednesdays. Before burial the dead body must be laid in state for the public to pay last respects. On the burial day, alcohol and other drinks are served by the bereaved family and lineage, and unofficial donations received. On the evening of the third day the bereaved lineage meets to set a date for the final funeral rites. Certain logistical considerations must be taken into account. Traditionally the rites could take place any weekend after the date of burial up to a year afterwards<sup>5</sup>, provided there was no conflict with other outstanding funeral arrangements in the community. It was very rare that the town chief would permit more than one final funeral rite to be held on the same day. Contemporary changes in the customary law do not allow final funeral rites to be postponed indefinitely. They must now be held the weekend following the burial if no other funerals have been scheduled for that time. Nonetheless, the final funeral rites for traditional elders of the town and those occupying important offices, and in some cases the wealthy, are allowed to take place after an appreciable lapse of time.

When a date is finally agreed upon the rites begin with a vigil kept on the Friday and the actual ceremony held on the Saturday and Sunday<sup>6</sup>. Preparations for the ceremonies begin days and in some cases weeks ahead of time, depending on the status of the deceased and that of his family in the community. Relatives, friends, and well-wishers of the deceased and the bereaved family both within and without the community are expected to attend. The scene during the weekend ceremonies is a mixture of wailing, singing of funeral dirges, sorrow, merry-making, drinking and feasting, and fasting on the part of the close adult kin of the deceased. During the course of the celebrations, donations to help defray the expenses incurred are received by the bereaved family and lineage. The economic aspects of the whole funeral ceremony include the raising of a loan to form the initial capital outlay, the expenses in-

curred during the course of holding the ceremony, dispensing the revenue acquired and re-allocating the productive resources of the deceased.

### *Raising the Initial Capital Outlay*

It is the responsibility of the bereaved family and lineage to obtain an initial capital fund to cover the expenses to be incurred. This money may come from a variety of sources, including a lineage fund, meant for emergencies, that is generated by a levy imposed on all members. All lineages in the community have such a fund and in 1982-83 the fee for each adult member ranged from C10-C20<sup>7</sup> among the various lineages. Loans may also be made by lineage elders. In the event that a respectable amount is not obtained from these two sources, it is then the responsibility of the lineage head to look elsewhere for a creditor. During this search for the initial capital, outstanding debts may be called in by bereaved individuals and families<sup>8</sup>. During the search for the initial capital outlay economic ties are established between individual creditors and lineage elders. In the recent past, even lineage lands were lost to creditors when loans contracted for the burial of members (see Dei, 1987) were not repaid.

### *Expenses*

There are various funeral expenses and the initial capital fund is used to cover part of them in order to get the funeral ceremony under way. Transportation and communication costs are incurred when relatives and friends living outside the community are informed of the death and the pending final funeral rites. The fund may be needed to cover hospital or other medical expenses of the deceased that were left unsettled before death. Items for laying the body in state (white cloth), and body decorations and ornaments for the deceased must be purchased. Fees are paid to professional women hired to decorate the body. The fund is used to pay for alcohol and other drinks for the invited guests and other customary obligations (e.g., when informing the local chief and elders of any developments regarding the death). Entertainment costs can include the provision of music at the funeral, e.g., having an electric generator for stereo music or hiring traditional drummers. There is also the cost of renting funeral chairs from the Town Development Committee (TDC) and the payment of a funeral levy imposed by the TDC and the Committee for the Defence of the

Revolution (CDR)<sup>9</sup> for services rendered at the funeral (e.g., keeping records of community donations). There are the food and lodging expenses of invited guests, outstanding debts (if any) of the deceased<sup>10</sup>, and other miscellaneous expenses, including unforeseen purchases, token payments in the form of drinks, and monetary payments made to the coffin attendants, coffin bearers, and gravediggers.

Not all expenses concerned with the burial of the dead and the final funeral rites are borne by the lineage. Customarily, the sons and daughters of a deceased male are expected to provide the coffin, a sum of money, and the burial clothes. Grandchildren often erect the shelter on the funeral grounds, and pay the gravediggers and coffin bearers. A husband is expected (but not obliged) to purchase a coffin and burial clothes for his deceased wife as an expression of his love and friendship for her and the lineage. It is said that a man does not bury his wife; her family bears the total funeral expenses and he merely contributes a gift (Ffoulkes, 1908:157; Rattray, 1927:180; Bascom, 1969:67). Certain token services may also be rendered by the in-laws of the deceased. When circumstances prevent these parties from fulfilling these tasks, e.g., when the children of the deceased are either too young or too poor to afford a coffin, they fall on the bereaved lineage. In other cases part of the lineage's financial burden may be lifted through the generosity of the children of the deceased. For example, affluent sons and daughters may decide to pay for the cost of entertainment at a parent's funeral ceremony. Because the funeral celebration is seen as an index of the socioeconomic status of the deceased and his family, the scale of provision of these services invariably adds to the overall cost incurred.

### *Revenue*

The revenues obtained from funeral celebrations come from both voluntary and non-voluntary contributions made to the bereaved lineage and the members of the immediate family of the deceased by friends, associates and the wider community. Non-voluntary contributions consist of a fixed levy for all adult members of the town, including citizens residing elsewhere. In 1982-83 the fee was C1 per adult, but there was a proposal for the amount to be increased to C5 in 1984. Members of the bereaved lineage are normally exempted from paying this levy, as well as all adult unmarried students both at home and abroad. Any married person, however,

even if below the adult age of twenty-one years, is expected to pay this community funeral levy<sup>11</sup>. There is also a special toll paid by the bereaved lineage members. This is a fixed sum, agreed upon by the lineage elders and expected from every adult member of the lineage. The exact amount varies from C10-C20, depending on the lineage and the sex of the individual member.

Voluntary contributions are made by invited guests, friends, and membership associations to which the deceased belonged. Such contributions also include payments made by town residents over and above the C1 stipulated by the local authorities. These payments can go to the bereaved lineage body and are included in its general funeral revenues. Voluntary contributions can also be made specifically to sons, daughters, and spouse(s) of the deceased or to any identified member of the bereaved family. They are meant to help defray the specific and personal expenses of the recipients (e.g. a son's expenses incurred in the purchase of his father's coffin, or in the entertainment of his guests at the funeral).

The customary procedure for the collection of these donations is for the Town Funeral Committee (TFC), a wing of the TDC, and the bereaved lineage to set up respective tables within close proximity of each other on the funeral grounds. Each table is manned by individuals equipped with books to record each payment made. While the TFC deals only with the non-voluntary contributions expected from all adult residents of the town, the lineage table handles both voluntary and non-voluntary contributions. Unlike the lineage, the TFC does not handle cash. All donations go to the lineage table and the TFC merely keeps records of the Ayirebi residents and citizens who pay their community levy to the bereaved lineage at that particular funeral ceremony. It has a book listing all adult residents of the community, including those temporarily absent, who are customarily required to pay the community funeral toll. The list is ordered in terms of house numbers. In the absence of birth and death records, the TFC relies on the community's vigilance and the individual household's honesty in reporting on all eligible to pay the funeral levy. Since community members tend to know themselves very well, the books of the TFC are up-to-date.<sup>12</sup>

A resident's failure to pay a funeral levy is considered shameful and the public is scornful of that person. At present there are penalties for defaulting on such payments, and household heads make payments on behalf of absentee members. Lineage and family heads also make sure kinsfolk pay such

community funeral levies. Community sanctions against defaulters take effect after failure to pay on five repeated occasions. When such a defaulter dies, his funeral may be boycotted by local residents on the recommendations of the TFC, unless the bereaved family or lineage first settles all his outstanding debts and pays an additional fine of C500. And when a close relative (son, daughter, father or mother) of a known defaulter dies, the latter risks losing community payments even though the deceased paid his or her funeral levy regularly. Residents could use the defaulter's dismal funeral donation record as a reason for only making the minimal payments required by the community towards funeral expenses. There are no community sanctions for failing to attend a funeral, as long as one sends the required contribution. However, society frowns on individuals who for no justifiable reason, such as sickness, childbirth, or temporary absence from the country, fail to attend a town funeral. All Ayirebi citizens residing elsewhere are expected to return home for a funeral as soon as they are informed of the event. Anyone who is regularly absent from community funerals, notwithstanding the fact that he or she pays the funeral levy at all times, runs the risk of poor attendance at his/her own funeral.

All fines are paid to the community chest but settlements of outstanding debts may be given to the bereaved families and lineages involved. The towncrier tells the public about the community boycott of a pending funeral ceremony. In living memory, there have only been two funerals that were officially boycotted. However, individual residents acknowledge that a few funerals were poorly attended, at least in part because a very close relative of the deceased or the deceased himself was known to be a regular absentee at town funerals. On the whole, relatives try to settle outstanding debts of family members, and offer excuses for those unable to attend a funeral before serious problems develop between absentees and the wider community.

At the end of the funeral celebration, the lineage head deducts all necessary lineage expenses, including the initial capital outlay, and makes public the net profit or loss. Table I outlines the nature of the expenses and revenues of the funerals of three typical individuals in the community<sup>13</sup>. Of the seventeen funerals studied in detail, nine (5 females and 4 males) generated a profit and eight (2 females and 6 males) incurred a loss. The economic status of the seventeen deceased individuals was as follows: three (3) wealthy; five (5) middle rich; and nine (9) poor. The net financial outcome for the funerals for the wealthy individuals was a loss in all three cases;



TABLE I

**STATEMENT OF ACCOUNT OF THE FUNERALS OF THREE  
REPRESENTATIVE INDIVIDUALS IN THE AYIREBI COMMUNITY**

ITEM	POORER FARMER FARMER	MIDDLE RICH FARMER	WEALTHY  (Absentee land- lord / retired medical doctor)
	C	C	C
<b>A) GENERAL EXPENSES</b>			
i) Transportation and communication	429	910	1,128
ii) Hospital and medical expenses	-	-	480
iii) Items (including ornaments) for body decoration	1,340	845	550
iv) Drinks and alcohol	2,820	3,906	4,075
v) Entertainment and music	250	500	1,200
vi) Renting of funeral chairs from TDC	150	200	250
vii) Food and other lodging expenses of guests	712	1,250	2,090
viii) Desk attendants' fee	65	50	100
ix) Levy paid to TDC	150	150	150
x) Miscellaneous (including debts of deceased)	1,505	1,820	2,192
<b>TOTAL (A)</b>	<b>7,421</b>	<b>9,631</b>	<b>12,215</b>
<b>B) REVENUE</b>			
i) Family and lineage contributions	2,510	1,090	2,630
ii) Community non-voluntary contributions	3,378	3,152	3,649
iii) Other forms of voluntary contributions (e.g. invited guests, voluntary associations, friends)	1,950	2,894	3,796
<b>TOTAL (B)</b>	<b>7,838</b>	<b>8,136</b>	<b>10,075</b>
<b>C) NET OUTCOME OF FUNERAL COSTS</b>	<b>Profit</b> 417	<b>Loss</b> 1,595	<b>Loss</b> 2,140

of those for the five middle rich, three resulted in profits while two incurred losses; and of those for the nine poor, six showed a profit and the remaining three losses. The data thus reveals that a high percentage (5 out of 8, or 62.5%) of the funeral ceremonies of the wealthy and middle rich, in contrast to those of the poor, ended in a net loss for the lineage.

The explanation for this may involve a complex of factors, including public admiration or dislike for the deceased. One of the more likely reasons appears to be the fact that relatively meagre voluntary contributions are received by the lineage of a deceased wealthy individual in contrast to similar contributions made directly to the children and spouse. It is general knowledge that with the system of matrilineal inheritance the property of the very rich is appropriated by the lineage. Except where the deceased made allowances, his children and spouse are almost always excluded from a share of the property. There are usually a large number of invited guests from outside the community attending a wealthy person's funeral, mainly because of the normally extensive list of the deceased's acquaintances. These guests, especially the educated and wealthy, out of personal awareness and sympathy, prefer to direct a greater portion of their donations to the children and spouse of the deceased than to the lineage. The irony of the situation is that in its attempts to reassert both the deceased and the family's socioeconomic status, the lineage incurs additional expenses during the funerals of its wealthy members. Thus even if more donations pour into the lineage account, they usually do not match the huge expenditure incurred. Although a breakdown of the net loss or profit of the funerals of the 17 Ayirebi residents does not reveal much difference between ceremonies for the poor and the rich, the expenditures on a poor person's funeral tend to be relatively minimal. One reason may be that few alcoholic drinks are served to guests and local residents. The poor bereaved family does not feel compelled, as the rich family does, to impress upon the guests or the local residents the socioeconomic status of the deceased. People are still inclined, on the other hand, to make the non-voluntary and voluntary donations, and however small these are, the net outcome is usually a gain for the lineage.

In order to minimize the rising cost of funerals to individual families, lineages, and the community at large, local authorities have begun to work on some guidelines<sup>14</sup> aimed at placing a ceiling on funeral expenditures while increasing revenues. Suggestions include raising the amount of the community funeral levy paid by Ayirebi citizens, setting a limit

on the amount to be raised as the initial capital outlay, and providing some of the social services for funerals through communal labour. Another contemporary measure already in effect, and referred to above, is holding the final funeral rites on the weekend following the burial. Local authorities have also cancelled the traditional practice of *adosowa*<sup>15</sup> in order to relieve women of economic burden and social humiliation. The community has also prohibited, with little success, the display of lavish or excessive grave goods. These measures are primarily intended to lessen the economic cost of local funerals and thereby help bereaved families, lineages, and the wider community as a whole to cope with stress.

### *Inheritance*

A basic idea behind the funeral celebration is to divest the deceased of all rights and transmit them to another person or persons (see Gray and Culliver, 1964). In the Ayirebi community, there are customary procedures by which bereaved family members are allocated specific rights and obligations with regard to control, ownership and exploitation of the resources and goods of the deceased. Questions of inheritance and succession to property and offices in the community are determined by the head of the lineage, following a pattern that takes into consideration sex, generation and age. Within the family and the lineage as a whole, men take precedence over women, brothers over a sister's sons, and the senior over the junior. As with other Akan groups (see Rattray, 1923:39-44), three basic principles are followed when it comes to inheritance and succession among the Ayirebi people. These are: *Oba di oba adie na obarima di obarima adie*, meaning, a woman inherits from a woman and a man from a man; *nuanom nsai a, wofase nni adi*, i.e., when one's brothers are not exhausted the sister's child does not inherit; and *adehye nsai a, akoa nni adi*, i.e., when freemen (people of the same blood) are not finished the slave does not succeed<sup>16</sup>.

Customarily, upon the death of a male homeowner, the house is taken over by the deceased individual's mother's brother. He usually passes over this right, however, to the brothers of the deceased, in order of seniority. In the absence of a brother, the deceased individual's mother's sister's son takes precedence. The next person in order of inheritance is the son of the sister of the deceased. When all possible male heirs are exhausted, females are considered in the order indicated below. The



above system of inheritance and succession also applies in relation to family and lineage land or farms. In the case of a woman's property, the foremost heir is the deceased individual's mother. Often she waives her right in favour of the dead woman's sisters, in order of seniority, followed by her own daughters, her sister's daughters, her granddaughters, and her sister's daughter's daughters. In the absence of female heirs, the property goes to the male heirs in the order described earlier (see also Manoukian, 1964; McLeod, 1981).

Colonial and post-colonial economic developments such as the introduction of a money economy,

wage labour and individual cocoa farms have affected traditional norms to the extent that the line of inheritance is now generally limited to the issue of a man's own mother and sisters, particularly in the case of lineage property. For individually acquired household property, individuals attempt to transfer such rights to their own children. As the lines of inheritance and succession to property come increasingly into conflict, problems of litigation have intensified in the community.

Table II shows the land inheritance patterns that followed the final funeral rites for the seventeen individuals in the study sample. The data shows

TABLE II

LAND INHERITANCE PATTERNS FOR 17 DECEASED AYIREBI RESIDENTS

Deceased	Type of land held (i.e. total no. of farm plots held by sample)*	System of Inheritance	Details of Matrilineal System of inheritance
A. Males (n=10)	19 Lineage farm plots	17 Maternal Kinsfolk 2 Sons	11 Nearest Brother's  1 Mother's Sister's Son  5 Sister's Sons
	7 individually acquired plots (outright purchase)	2 Maternal Kinsfolk 3 Sons 2 Sons & Daughters (no specification)	1 Nearest Brother 1 Sister's Son
	1 Rent Land	Son	
	1 Stool Land	Son	
B. Females (n=7)	8 Lineage farm plots	8 Maternal Kinsfolk	4 Sisters by seniority 4 Daughters
	3 individually acquired plots	3 Maternal Kinsfolk	2 Sisters 1 Daughter

\* The figure takes account of the fact that normally the individual owns more than one of a particular type of farmland (see Dei, 1987).

differences in the inheritance patterns of family or lineage land and individually acquired land. With regard to other forms of property in the community (e.g., house and personal effects), six out of the ten deceased males in the study sample were either owners or custodians of a total of seven houses<sup>17</sup>. Six of the houses were passed over to matrilineal heirs, of which four were nearest brothers, in order of seniority, of the deceased, and the remaining two were sisters' sons. The seventh house was inherited by the children of the deceased. Among the seven females in the sample, only two owned or were custodians of two houses. Both houses were inherited by sisters of the deceased in order of seniority. With regard to personal effects such as money, clothing (including jewelry), livestock, farming tools, and cooking utensils, the general pattern was for deceased females' property to be taken over by daughters or sisters in order of seniority. For males' personal effects, no clear pattern was observed. But, there was a broad division between the children of the deceased and his matrilineal heir, depending on prevailing circumstances such as the age of the children and the economic status of the heir.

## Discussion

Anthropologists and other social scientists studying funeral ceremonies in traditional societies have focused mainly on social and religious aspects and have not treated economic aspects sufficiently (see also Rosenblatt *et al.*, 1976:121; Huntington and Metcalf, 1979). With a few exceptions such as Goody (1962) and Bloch and Parry (1982), the primary concern has been the role of funeral celebrations in fostering social cohesion and solidarity among peoples, and their religious or ritual significance. Funerals are seen as largely ceremonial, i.e., they are part of those collective actions, required by custom, that are performed on occasions of change in social life (Goody, 1962). Although in most traditional societies a funeral celebration is primarily a social event, it also has fundamental economic implications. A detailed examination of the processes involved in the preparation of the corpse, burial, and observance of the final funeral rites shows an elaborate division of labour and economic cost within the household, the lineage, and the wider community. Together with the redistribution of certain roles of the deceased (especially those related to economic duties and responsibilities, privileges, and rights), funeral rites can also be seen as a means whereby people attempt to cope with economic stress. As this

study shows, a funeral is an event embedded in economic relations. It is a time not only for cementing or reinforcing existing social, religious, and political ties, but economic ties as well. In fact, new ties are often created. New economic relations may be formed from the redistribution and re-allocation of the means of production (land and capital) among individuals in the bereaved household and lineage, with resultant implications for the larger community as well. Within the community, funeral ceremonies demonstrate a strong sense of reciprocity and sharing of economic costs and benefits. There is a division of costs involved in the celebration of the event with regard to finding the initial capital outlay and fulfilling one's share of economic responsibilities (e.g., funeral donations). There is also the sharing of benefits, whether in the form of the amount a bereaved individual or group receives to help defray incurred expenses, or in the provision of alcohol, and other drinks, and food to all participating in the occasion. When a profit is made from a funeral celebration it is normally given to the matrilineal heir, who may divide it among members of the immediate family. A net loss, on the other hand, is shared among all adult members of the bereaved lineage, according to the heads of the constituent families or minimal lineages, with the matrilineal heir occasionally assuming a large portion of the debt. Equally significant is the fact that funerals present individuals and families with an opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to social responsibility and reassert their economic and social status in the community. A local resident, for example, may decide to pay more than the stipulated community levy in order to demonstrate his or her wealth and love. Most men do not want to pay the same levy as the women and thus insist on making higher donations. Very substantial contributions are usually announced publicly on the funeral grounds so that the donor is widely acknowledged and praised<sup>18</sup>. A visitor to the community could determine the economic and social status of the deceased by the attendance at the funeral and its scale of organization. As already pointed out, the well-attended and better organized funerals were for individuals who fulfilled their community responsibilities (e.g., attending funerals and paying funeral levies) during their lifetimes.

Other issues of economic significance include changes in dietary patterns during the funeral rites. For example, there is conspicuous consumption of such 'prestige' foods as yams and livestock (sheep and goats), particularly among the invited guests and friends, which contrasts sharply with the fasting

undertaken by very close relatives of the deceased. There are also changes in farming practices, such as intense farming in the weekdays preceding a funeral in order to provide stores of food for the weekend when farm work is done at half-pace. This is especially true if there is a funeral for a very important personality in the community. On the other hand, close relatives of the deceased may decide to postpone farm work for a whole week in order to plan for the final funeral ceremonies. In this case the preceding week would be devoted to making up the time to be lost. While the pouring in of outsiders from neighbouring villages and towns surely re-affirms the bond of solidarity that exists among the peoples, the brisk economic activities that ensue cannot be overlooked (Goody, 1962:51). Record sales of certain market food items and other economic goods like tobacco, alcohol and other drinks, and chewing gum are usually noticed by local traders during the funeral weekend.

The most significant economic aspect of funerals is what happens to productive resources after the owner or holder's death. The fact of death means that relatively exclusive rights to property, including goods and services, must be transmitted from one individual (the deceased) to another (the heir). These rights must be separated from the deceased and transferred to the living in order for the socioeconomic system to reproduce and perpetuate itself. Inheritance involves re-adjustment in the distribution of economic duties and rights in property whether or not they are jointly held. In the Ayirebi community, there was traditionally a sole heir to the property of the deceased. In today's reality, however, the transmission of property has become variable and fragmented (see Hill, 1972:185, 1975). Some of the reasons for this situation can be found in the matrilineal system of inheritance and succession to family property and office itself, the existence of a cash economy, and the consequent varied and diverse ways through which an individual can now acquire property. Elsewhere (Dei, 1987) I have discussed the varied ways of land acquisition and use in this community. The system of matrilineal descent stipulates strictly that inheritance of family property must be through the matrilineage and extended to the whole kin group. Given both the list of prospective matrilineal heirs and contemporary developments in education that stress strong parent-child-spouse ties, not only can a conflict of interests be expected, but also a variation in property transmission.

The presence of a long list of eligible heirs encourages politicking when lineage elders meet to

choose a sole matrilineal heir at the end of the funeral rites for the deceased. Certain key decision-makers are tempted to seek favours from candidates who are willing to make promises to gain support. The selection of one heir over another, even when customary procedures are strictly adhered to, leaves room for constant squabbles and litigation within the family and lineage (Le Franc, 1981). In a move to forestall or end any internal divisions, the chosen heir may decide to apportion part of the inherited property to other members of the family (e.g., other prospective heirs). Writing about inheritance of land in West Africa, Hill (1975:119-136) rightly pointed out that generally inheritance is impartible and the sole heir is entitled to retain a large proportion of the family farmland for his or her use, but he/she also has an obligation to grant usufruct rights to members of his/her lineage who require them.

There are also cases of property splitting between the matrilineal kinsfolk and the spouse and children of the deceased because of a decision made by the latter prior to his death. The basis for this lies in the now popular distinction between privately acquired property and lineage property. Table II shows that fathers, for example, are inclined to leave individually acquired farm plots to their sons and daughters rather than to their matrilineal kinsfolk. Even when such arrangements are not made prior to death, some lineages may partially arrange for the continued support of the widow and her children. Furthermore, the old custom of marrying the widow, though very rare in contemporary times, usually had more to do with providing sustenance and shelter than with exercising sexual rights.

## *Conclusion*

The study of funeral ceremonies in Ayirebi shows that the spirit of reciprocity and sharing is still common among the people. In a limited sense funerals constitute a redistributive mechanism<sup>19</sup>. There is little doubt that the system discussed here is an adaptive strategy evolved over the years by the local population in order to cope with economic hardship. Without community help, most individuals and family groups would find themselves in perpetual debt after performing the sociocultural and religious responsibilities of burying the dead (see also Clarence-Smith and Moorsom, 1977:97). That funeral ceremonies can help ease social and economic pain is even more clear when it is noted that a relative can decide to hold a subsidiary or secondary funeral for the dead long after the major funeral rites were

conducted in another community where the deceased was residing. In such a case, the grieving relative's hope is to recoup some of the expenses he or she personally incurred during the deceased's first funeral.

Under the current harsh economic conditions, the rich try to reassert their prestige and high status by an elaborate display of pomp, pageantry and wealth during funerals. Poor bereaved families who cannot afford such a display of wealth rely on cheaper local resources (e.g., local coffins, food and drinks), free services, and financial help from wealthy individuals to put on respectable funerals. These families hope that an impressive but not necessarily expensive funeral will help them break even, make a profit, or partially restore status lost due to the economic hardships of modern times. These factors explain why attempts by the local polity to place a ceiling on funeral expenses have met with little success, particularly among rich families.

Funeral celebrations are not becoming smaller. In response to current economic hardships, the community has widened its collection of funeral levies. The goal of bereaved families is to attract as many people as possible to their funerals. The local policy enforces the traditional sanctions against defaulters of community funeral levies. Community members find it uneconomical to default on such payments. No individual wants to saddle his/her family with a huge funeral debt because the wider community refused to assist in meeting funeral expenses. Funeral levies, therefore, are paid as a form of insurance of reciprocal obligations should death occur within the family in the future. One can safely predict that in the coming years, should the crisis in the Ghanaian economy continue, large scale funerals will continue to be held primarily as a prestige seeking mechanism for some, and for others, to ensure favorable economic returns. For the latter, the aim is to increase funeral returns without sacrificing the scale of celebration.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the help of University of Toronto Professors Richard Lee and Maxine Kleindienst in the preparation of this manuscript. I am also grateful to the University of Toronto for the award of a Connaught Scholarship, which enabled me to go to Ghana in 1982 and 1983 to collect the material for this study. Special thanks go to the chief and people of Ayirebi, whose warm hospitality and assistance have made this work possible.

### NOTES

1. It should be noted that expensive funeral celebrations are not confined to West African peoples (see Metcalf, 1982; Huntington and Metcalf, 1979; Bloch and Parry, 1982). The big "funeral complex" was also introduced into the western hemisphere with the formation of insurance and societies in the United States to help allay the cost of large, prestige seeking funerals (see Herskovits, 1962:200-203; Powdermaker, 1969:247-252).

2. Nketiah (1969:6ff) has pointed out the general belief that there is a world of the dead built on the same pattern as that of the living. Thus, when a person dies he or she goes to the ancestors (see also Bloch, 1971; Bloch and Parry, 1982:218).

3. Rattray (1923:203-12), Herskovits (1940:136-8), Forde (1946:61) and Coursey and Coursey (1971:445-84) have all demonstrated how much of the social, cultural, and religious lives of West African forest populations (particularly before the advent of Western European culture) have centred around yams. This is seen from the annual celebration of the New Yam festival in almost all traditional communities. Unfortunately, the economic aspects of the festival have received relatively little attention.

4. I have chosen to concentrate on these relatively neglected economic aspects, leaving the reader to consult Rattray (1927), Sarpong (1974), and Goody (1962) for extensive accounts of the socio-religious aspects of death and funeral celebrations among Ghanaian societies.

5. The reason that the final funeral rites might be as much as a year after death was because it took that much time, in the case of the rich and titled, to decide on an appropriate heir.

6. Members of the Seventh Day Adventist (S.D.A.) religious body do not bury their dead or perform final funeral rites on a Saturday.

7. In 1982-83, when this study was conducted, the exchange rate of the local currency, cedi (C), was C2.45 to \$1.00 Cdn.

8. It should be stressed that when the deceased is a wife, the husband is never consulted for a loan. He is considered an "outsider" and no reputable lineage wants to demean itself by going to an in-law or husband for a loan to bury its dead. In fact, in the past, if a husband paid his wife's funeral costs it indicated that she was a slave.

9. The local chief, in consultation with his elders, selects the members of the Town Development Committee (TDC). Membership on the Committee for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR) is open to all town residents. This latter body was formerly called the People's Defence

Committee (PDC). It is a recently evolved political action group, resulting from an idea introduced nationwide in 1982 by the ruling Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) government.

10. It is important that all creditors notify the bereaved family of any outstanding debts of the deceased. If a creditor is not present at the time of a debtor's death, his claim must be lodged within one month after he learns of the death. A debt could be repudiated if a creditor failed to make proper notification (see also Ffoulkes, 1908:155).

11. It should also be pointed out that Ayirebi residents and citizens who are exempted from paying a funeral levy sometimes do so anyway.

12. The actual process for making a funeral donation is for the person to first approach the lineage table. He or she then makes a donation to the lineage and receives applause from a section of the lineage members seated behind the bookkeepers. His or her name and the amount paid are recorded in a book owned by the lineage. A piece of wooden stick is given to the donor, who takes it to the table belonging to the Town Funeral Committee (TFC) and has his or her name checked on the town master list. Sometimes a household head pays for all his/her adult members, including those resident elsewhere, and is later reimbursed by the individuals concerned. It is a common sight to see women and even children with money and a piece of paper in their hands (showing a list of names) approach the lineage table to make donations on behalf of household members.

13. The economic categories of poorer, middle rich and wealthy are based on considerations of the individuals' annual income from all economic production (obtained from their spouses and close kin) as well as immovable assets such as land and houses. The information obtained corresponded with the views of other community members regarding the economic status of the deceased. I was privileged to sit as a bookkeeper behind the lineage table at two of the three funerals.

14. The rising costs of funerals has been a matter for legislation (by-laws) throughout southern Ghana since the 1920's, when State Councils issued regulations putting an upper limit on costs according to the rank of the deceased. However, most communities have tended to ignore such government intervention in their funeral practices. In 1982 and 1983, the Ayirebi authorities were trying to find a lasting local solution that would satisfy both state government concerns and community interests.

15. *Adosowa* is a practice whereby a widow is made to parade up and down the town streets carrying a bundle (*adosowa*) on her head during the funeral ceremonies for her husband. The bundle consists of purchased goods such as a piece of cloth, a pillow, a stool and a pair of sandals. Assisted by her sisters, the widow sings songs in honour of

her dead husband, inviting his spirit to possess her. When this happens, she sways about and rocks from side to side, and this means that the deceased is pleased with her and the in-laws and wishes them no ill (see also Rattray, 1927:174).

16. This third principle was particularly important in the past when prisoners of war and people sold into slavery, as well as visitors, were fictively adopted into Akan kin groups.

17. Five of the six deceased males owned a house each, while the sixth had two houses.

18. In fact, when I asked some local residents to identify the wealthy in their midst, they advised me to observe payments made by individuals during funeral ceremonies. They contended that the very rich in the community were those likely to make huge payments over and above the prescribed community levy. Of course amounts also depended on donors' social and economic ties with the deceased. Generally, the idea of determining the rich in rural communities from a study of funeral donations may have some relevance for social science field research.

19. The redistributive function of funerals is found in the differential contributions made by community members (e.g., the rich versus the poor), the possible fragmentation of the property of the deceased person among eligible heirs (instead of accumulation by a single heir) in order to prevent lineage squabbles, and the fact that the poor usually make a profit while the rich do not. Historical evidence (Arhin, 1974) reveals that the rich, more often than the poor, experienced losses at funerals. Such losses were and still remain one of the main reasons why stool, family, and individually acquired lands are either mortgaged or sold, thus leading to changes in property relations.

## REFERENCES

- ARHIN, K.  
1974 Some Asante Views of Colonial Rule: as Seen in the Controversy Relating to Death Duties, Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana, 15(1).
- BASCOM, W.R.  
1952 The Esusu: A Credit Institution of Yoruba, Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain, 82(1):62-70.
- BASCOM, W.R.  
1969 The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

- BLOCH, M.  
1971 *Placing the Dead: Tombs, Ancestral Villages and Kinship Organization in Madagascar*, London, Berkeley Square House.
- BLOCH, M. and J. PARRY (eds.)  
1982 *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, New York, Cambridge University Press.
- CLARENCE-SMITH, G. and R. MOORSOM  
1977 *Underdevelopment and Class Formation in Ovamboland, 1844-1917*, IN, R. Palmer and N. Parsons (eds.), *The Roots of Rural Poverty*, London, Heinemann: 95-107.
- COHEN, R.  
1967 *The Kanuri of Bornu*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- COURSEY, C.K. and C. COURSEY  
1971 *The New Yam Festivals of West Africa*, *Anthropos*, 66: 444-484.
- DEI, G.J.S.  
1987 *Land and Food Production in a Ghanaian Forest Community*, *Africa Development*, 12(1): 101-124.
- DEI, G.J.S.  
1988 *Crisis and Adaptation in a Ghanaian Forest Community*, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 62(1): 63-72.
- ELLIS, A.B.  
1965 *The Ewe Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa*, Chicago, Benin Press Ltd.
- FFOULKES, A.  
1908 *Funeral Customs of the Gold Coast Colony*, *African Affairs*, 8: 154-64.
- FORDE, D.  
1946 *The Native Economies of Nigeria*, London, Faber and Faber.
- 1962 *Death and Succession: An Analysis of Yako Mortuary Ritual*, IN, Max Gluckman (ed.), *Essays on the Ritual of Social Relations*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- GOODY, J.  
1962 *Death, Property and the Ancestors*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.
- GRAY, R.F. and P.M. GULLIVER (eds.)  
1964 *The Family Estate in Africa: Studies in the Role of Property in Family Structure and Lineage Continuity*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.
- HERSKOVITS, M.J.  
1940 *The Economic Life of Primitive Peoples*, New York, Alfred Knopf Inc.
- 1962 *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Boston, Beacon Press.
- 1967 *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom*, Vol. I., Evanston, Northwestern University Press.
- HILL, P.  
1972 *Rural Hausa: A Village and a Setting*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- 1975 *The West African Farming Household*, IN, J. Goody (ed.), *Changing Social Structure in Ghana*, London, International African Institute: 119-36.
- HUNTINGTON, R. and P. METCALF  
1979 *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- LE FRANC, E.  
1981 *Social Structure, Land Use and Food Availability in the Caribbean*, *Food and Nutrition Bulletin*, 3(4): 5-11.
- LITTLE, K.  
1967 *The Mende of Sierra Leone: A West African People in Transition*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- MANOUKIAN, M.  
1964 *Akan and Ga-Adangme Peoples of Ghana*, London, Oxford University Press.
- McLEOD, M.D.  
1981 *The Asante*, London, British Museum Publications.
- METCALF, P.  
1982 *Borneo Journey Into Death: Berawan Eschatology from its Rituals*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania.
- NKETIAH, J.H.  
1969 *Funeral Dirges of the Akan People*, New York, Negro University Press.
- POWDERMAKER, H.  
1969 *After Freedom*, New York, Russell and Russell.
- RATTRAY, R.S.  
1923 *Ashanti*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- RATTRAY, R.S.  
1927 *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, London, Oxford University Press.



ROSENBLATT, P.C., R.P. WALSH and D.A. JACKSON  
(eds.)  
1976 *Grief and Mourning in Cross-Cultural  
Perspective*, New Haven, CT, HRAF Press.

SARPONG, P.  
1974 *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian  
Culture*, Accra, Ghana Publishing Corporation.

SKINNER, P.E.  
1964 *The Mossi of the Upper Volta*, Stanford, Stanford  
University Press.

WARREN, D.M.  
1973 *The Akan of Ghana: An Overview of the  
Ethnographic Literature*, Accra, Pointer Ltd.