

Funerals in a time of crisis: COVID-19 and funerary practices in Ghana

Fidelia Nana Akom Ohemeng¹, Mark Kwaku Mensah Obeng^{1*} and Stephen Afranie²

Abstract

Funeral rites in Ghana are central to social cohesion, cultural identity, and beliefs about the transition to the spiritual world. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these practices through restrictions on social gatherings and ritual performance. This study examines how bereaved families among the Akan and Ga navigated these disruptions. Using a qualitative design, in-depth interviews were conducted with families in selected urban and rural communities in the Ashanti and Greater Accra regions. Thematic analysis revealed that key funeral practices—including one-week observances, family meetings, laying-in-state, and final funeral rites—were modified, postponed, or simplified. Attendance was significantly reduced, limiting communal mourning and financial contributions. Families adapted through private burials, delayed ceremonies, and, in some cases, digital practices such as live-streaming and mobile money transfers. Despite these adjustments, participants expressed dissatisfaction with restricted funerals. The study concludes that while COVID-19 temporarily altered funeral practices, the cultural significance of funerary rites among the Akan and Ga remains resilient.

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¹Department of Sociology, University of Ghana

²Centre of Social Policy Studies, University of Ghana

***Corresponding author:** Department of Sociology, University of Ghana, P.O. Box LG 65, Legon, Accra,
Email: mkobeng@ug.edu.gh

Introduction

Funeral rites in Ghana are among the most elaborate and socially significant cultural practices, serving as key rites of passage that mark the transition from the physical world to the spiritual realm. Within many Ghanaian societies, particularly among the Akan and Ga, death is not viewed as an end but as a continuation of existence in the ancestral world. As such, funerary rituals are essential for ensuring the safe passage of the deceased and maintaining harmonious relations between the living and the dead (Adjandeh & Adzei, 2025; van der Geest, 2000; aan Gennep, 1960). Failure to perform appropriate rites is believed to result in spiritual unrest, with potential consequences for the wellbeing of surviving family members (Bonsu, 2007; van der Geest, 2004).

Beyond their spiritual significance, funeral rites in Ghana function as important social events that reinforce kinship ties, affirm social status, and foster community solidarity. These events often involve large gatherings, elaborate ceremonies, and significant financial investments, reflecting both respect for the deceased and the social standing of the bereaved family (Arhin, 1994; de Witte, 2003; Jack, et al., 2020; van der Geest, 2000). Funerals also serve as platforms for the public display of identity, prestige, and social networks, with attendance and contributions from mourners constituting important markers of social recognition (Agyekum, 2008a; Prah, 2004; van der Geest, 2004).

Historically, public health crises have influenced funerary practices across African societies. For instance, the HIV/AIDS epidemic which increased mortality led to adjustments in the organisation of funerals and attendance in parts of East and Southern Africa (Snyder et al., 2006). Similarly, during the 2013 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, public health authorities introduced “safe burial” protocols to curb transmission, often resulting in tensions between public health guidelines and local cultural practices (Akwa & Maingi, 2020; Snyder et al., 2006). These examples demonstrate that while funeral rites are deeply rooted in cultural and religious beliefs, they are also subject to change under external pressures.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced unprecedented global restrictions that significantly disrupted social and cultural life, including funeral practices. Measures such as limits on public gatherings, restrictions on corpse handling, bans on wake-keeping, and the enforcement of rapid burials altered traditional mourning practices in many societies (Bank & Sharpley, 2020). In Ghana, government directives limited funeral attendance to small numbers and encouraged private burials, fundamentally challenging the communal nature of funerary rites (Adom et al., 2023; Takyiakwaa et al., 2023). These restrictions were often met with resistance, as families struggled to reconcile public health requirements with cultural expectations of conducting “befitting” funerals (Boaheng, 2021).

Although emerging scholarship has examined the general impact of COVID-19 on

funerary practices in Ghana, there remains limited empirical understanding of how bereaved families navigated these disruptions within specific cultural contexts, particularly among the Akan and Ga (Adom et al., 2023; Takyiakwaa et al., 2023) ethnic groups. Existing studies have largely focused on policy responses and cultural tensions, with less attention given to lived experiences, coping strategies, and the implications for the continuity of ritual practices. This study addresses this gap by exploring how COVID-19 affected funerary rites among the Akan and Ga in Ghana and how families adapted to the imposed restrictions. Specifically, the study examines (1) how COVID-19 restrictions altered the organization and performance of funeral rites, (2) how families navigated these constraints, and (3) the implications of these changes for the future of funerary practices. By drawing on qualitative data from bereaved families, the study contributes to broader discussions on the resilience of cultural practices in times of crisis and the interplay between public health interventions and deeply embedded social traditions.

Funeral rites in Ghana

In Ghana funeral rites consist of the performance of several rituals aimed at sending off the dead to the land of spirits. Traditionally, death is conceived of as a transition of individuals from the physical world to the land of the spirits (*asamando* in Akan), thus funeral rites facilitate the transition of the deceased from the human world to the spiritual world (Adjei et al., 2024; Boateng & Anngela-Cole, 2012; Owusu, 2025). If the deceased is not sent off well, they might end up being trapped between the human world and the spiritual world and become a feral spirit (*saman twentwen* in Akan). Not sending off the dead well could have repercussions on the wellbeing of the living (Bonsu, 2007). Thus, having a befitting funeral is the most crucial service “the family can and should render to them” (van der Geest, 2000). Considering this some Ghanaians marshal all efforts to make funeral rites an unforgettable one as they view it as their duty to the deceased (Arhin, 1994).

Not all deaths are accorded the traditional mortuary rites in Ghana. Traditional funeral rites are not performed for deaths considered bad. Bad deaths are considered untimely and could be deaths through accident, fire, drowning, pregnancy-related deaths, or death of a child (Adinkrah, 2022; van der Geest, 2004). The scale of funeral rites is also determined by the status of the deceased such as age, class, and political class, religious affiliation, etc.

The dominant literature on funeral rites in Ghana focus on the extravagance and wasteful nature (de Witte, 2003; Jack et al., 2020) and the transformations of funerals from a sacred/spiritual practice to a secular and commercial one (Boateng & Anngela-Cole, 2012; Bonetti, 2019; Ofose, 2023; Potocnik & Adum-Kyeremeh, 2022). Others have argued that funeral rites are an occasion for the family to showcase their political and social status in society and not only about honouring the dead (Bonsu, 2007; Prah,

2004; van der Geest, 2000). Yet still, others posit that the transformations have economic implications for the societies that observe these rites (Arhin, 1994; Boateng & Anngela-Cole, 2012; de Witte, 2003; Lotsu, 2025). Studies on funerals after COVID-19 focus on the impact of the pandemic, however, there is a dearth of knowledge on how bereaved families navigated the restrictions and whether the changes that occurred permanently transformed funeral rites in Ghana. This gap is what this research seeks to address.

Funeral practices among the Akan and Ga

Funeral rites among the Akans and the Gas are similar in principle and practice; there are some variations in certain aspects, which will be highlighted in the paper. The Akan term for funeral rites is *ayie*, which means to honour, while in Ga it is known as *yala*. The term funeral is used to describe all the practices and rituals that commence immediately a death occurs and even beyond the final funeral rites. Funeral rites among the Ga and the Akan consists of elaborate rituals and activities, which are considered essential for the safe passage of the deceased to the spiritual world. Among the Akans, the practices consist of the one-week (*nnaɔtwe da*) and forty-day (*adaduanan*) observances, the burial rites (*dɔteyie*), final funeral rites (*ayie pa*), and one-year observance (*afeda*). Among the Gas, funerals consist of structured family meetings, burial rites, final funeral rites, and the one-year observances (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2020; Bonetti, 2019). For both groups, the Monday after the final funeral rites is the day the family takes account of the whole funeral rites (*akontabu*). Other rituals which are common to both groups are bathing the dead, laying-in-state, wake-keeping, and burial. In the findings section we describe the funeral practices that pertained before the pandemic and how these were affected.

Methods

Research design

This paper draws on the qualitative component of a larger mixed-methods study examining the impact of COVID-19 on funerary practices in Ghana. While the larger study employed a mixed methods design to capture both the scale and the lived experience of the impact of the pandemic on funerals, the analysis presented here is based exclusively on data from in-depth interviews conducted as part of the qualitative component. This focus was adopted because the research questions addressed in this paper are concerned with meaning-making and lived experience — how bereaved families interpreted and navigated disruptions to funerary norms during the pandemic — questions that are better answered through the depth and nuance of qualitative inquiry than through quantitative measurement alone.

Study sites

The study was conducted in the Ashanti and Greater Accra regions in Ghana. These two regions were selected because they were the epicentres of the COVID-19 cases. While the Asantes are known for their elaborate funeral celebrations, the Gas are famous for their fantasy coffins (abebuu adekai/proverb coffins). The Asante is one of the Akan ethnic groups, others being Fante, Akyem, Akwapim, Kwahu, Bono, and Akwamu. The Akans are matrilineal and speak a common language called Twi or Akan. On the other hand, the Ga, mostly patrilineal, is part of the Ga-Dangme group consisting of the Ga, Krobo, Ada, Ningo-Prampram, and Shai-Osudoku.

Two communities, rural and urban, were selected from each region. The urban communities selected were those considered 'traditional' in nature. That is, majority of the residents were from the major ethnic group under consideration, and which had known family houses. For the rural areas, the community should be at the fringe of the urban community and be classified as rural by the Ghana Statistical Service. In the Ashanti region, Tafo-Pankrono in the Old-Tafo Municipality was selected for the urban site and Apimanim in Amansie South District as the rural site. In the Greater Accra region, Nungua in the Ledzokuku Municipal Assembly was selected as the urban community and Amasaman in the Ga West Municipal Assembly as the rural community.

Participants selection

As part of the survey, respondents were asked whether they had personally lost a relative during the COVID-19 pandemic or knew of a family that had. Where respondents identified such families, these referrals were followed up to identify and approach potential participants for the qualitative interviews. Identified participants were also asked if they knew of other bereaved families. To be eligible for the study participants must have lost a relative during the COVID-19 pandemic (from when the pandemic emerged to the removal of the restrictions), or the person must have died before the pandemic, but the funeral was slated for when the pandemic emerged. Also, the participant must be a close relative of the deceased defined as a parent, spouse, sibling, or child, and must have been directly involved in the major decision-making about the funeral.

Interview guide

The semi-structured interviews explored customary funeral practices, how the pandemic disrupted these practices, and how families navigated the resulting COVID-19 restrictions. Interviews also examined the broader implications of these restrictions for funeral rites, and which pandemic-era practices have persisted beyond the crisis. Data were also gathered on participants' deceased relatives, who included parents (mothers

and fathers), spouses (husbands and wives), siblings (brothers and sisters), children (sons and daughters). Interviews were conducted mainly in the local language (Ga and Twi), recorded, and transcribed into English. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the College of Humanities, University of Ghana, protocol number ECH 366/ 21-22. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants. The purpose, procedures, and scope of the study were explained to each participant, along with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity in the reporting of findings. Participants were also informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. Those who agreed to participate were asked to provide consent: literate participants signed a written consent form, while those unable to sign provided a thumbprint in lieu of a signature, in the presence of the researcher.

Data analysis

To ensure reliability and validity, data collection and analysis proceeded in stages. In the first stage, heads of families were interviewed to gather information on customary funeral practices, establishing a baseline understanding of traditional norms prior to examining pandemic-related disruptions. These interviews were transcribed and reviewed before proceeding to the second stage, in which bereaved families were interviewed about their specific experiences during the pandemic. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis and was conducted collaboratively by the three researchers. Each researcher independently read a few of the transcripts to identify recurring patterns, and these initial observations formed the basis for the development of a coding scheme. The transcripts were then coded in NVivo (version 14), after which all researchers reviewed the coded data collectively to refine and consolidate the identified patterns into overarching themes.

Participants' profile

A total of 31 participants were recruited across the four sites, comprising eight each from Tafo-Pankrono, Apimanim, and Amasaman, and seven from Nungua. There were slightly more females in the Tafo-Pankrono and Amasaman sites. Participants' ages ranged from 33 to 101 years, with the majority falling between 50 and 75 years. Ethnic affiliation closely tracked study site: participants from Apimanim and Tafo-Pankrono were all

Asante, while those from Amasaman and Nungua were all Ga. Most participants were Christian, with one participant from Amasaman identifying as Muslim. Educational attainment was generally low, consistent with typical levels among older adults in Ghana, and only a small number of participants had attained tertiary education.

Participants' occupations were concentrated in the informal sector, including trade, farming, hawking, food vending, and artisanal work (e.g., cobbler, steel bender), alongside a smaller number in salaried or professional roles (e.g., retired teacher, businessman, herbalist, pensioner). This occupational profile reflects the broadly informal, semi-urban, and peri-urban character of the four study communities.

Findings

The findings are presented in two parts: the first is on the effects of the COVID-19 restrictions on funeral rites and the impact of the pandemic at the time. We describe funeral rites as it pertained to pre-COVID-19, the effects of COVID-19 restrictions on funeral rites, and how bereaved families navigated the restrictions.

Pre-funeral preparations prior to COVID-19

The one-week observance among the Akan

The first communal gathering of Akan funeral rites is the observance of 'one-week' (nnawɔtwe da), which is observing the eight days since the passing of the deceased. Traditionally, it is the time the family officially meets to discuss arrangements for the burial and final funeral rites and convey same to the community and sympathisers (Faleke et al., 2024). In the Akan communities studied many families could not perform the one-week celebrations due to the COVID-19 restrictions imposed by the government. Below are some excerpts from the participants:

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the restriction on funerals, we couldn't have the one-week observation as we would have done in recent times. Due to the COVID-19, when you even have the one-week observation, people would not be able to come. Also, in this town, there are chiefs, assembly men, and other leaders who would come and say you have disobeyed the directives of the government when you have the one-week observation. If you go and rent the canopies and chairs too, you will be charged. If you do all these rentals and sit down and people don't attend, you will incur a lot of expenses. Due to all these reasons, we didn't have the one-week celebration for her. (TPIDI, 03F).

Participants were compelled to adhere to the COVID-19 protocols which were being enforced by both traditional and local authority leaders. Participants were also mindful of the fact that not many mourners would attend the programme because of the fear of

being infected and the restrictions. However, some participants, especially those in the rural community observed the one-week celebration though it was a hushed one.

We gave out water. During one-week celebrations, food and drinks are not usually served. Because of COVID, the celebration did not pan out as it ought to (APIDI, 01M).

The findings reveal that families that could not perform the one-week celebration added it to the burial and final funeral rites. Changes have been observed in the one-week celebrations even before the pandemic. The current practice is that the one week could be celebrated any time.

Family meetings among the Ga

As indicated, the Gas do not traditionally observe the one-week of the passing of a deceased, instead three mandatory meetings are held by the family to plan for the final funeral rites for deceased relatives. The meetings are attended by the children, surviving spouse and members of the extended family, both the maternal and paternal side. The meetings are normally held at the family house on the father's side called "We". The meetings are used to plan for the funeral, raise funds and share tasks. Due to the ban on social gatherings the meetings could not be held in-person but rather on the phone. Below is an extract from a participant at Amasaman.

We were about four people that had the discussions. Then we would call and inform others about the decisions arrived at. Then we decided that at exactly 9.00 am, the corpse would be brought from the mortuary and the people that would have to come would come. A lot of people were not needed because only the heads of the various families involved were present. Even the total number of people who performed the funeral was not up to 50 people. After he was buried, we came back, washed our hands as custom demands, and then left for our homes. No drinks, food or water was served as was normally done. (AMIDI, 05F)

The general strategy was that only a few people planned the funeral, and technology (phone) was employed to conduct the meetings.

The Burial (Akan: dɔteyie)

Preparation of the body

An important rite for both Akans and Gas is the preparation of the body for burial. This consists of the bathing of the corpse and dressing it in preparation for laying-in-state and burial. This is an important ritual of which failure to perform it could have serious

consequences for the family and even the deceased. Traditionally, only old women of a family have the responsibility of bathing deceased relatives. Among the Akans, the firstborn of the deceased must be the first to put water on the body of the deceased. In recent times though the bathing and preparation of the body have been outsourced to undertakers, however, a few relatives must be present when the body is being prepared.

Customarily, surviving spouses, in-laws, and children are supposed to present 'bathing things' (adware dea, in Akan) to the family to be used to bath the corpse. The bathing things include soap, traditional sponge, perfume, bucket, towel, pillow, straw mat, powder, and wax prints. These things are presented to the family through the elderly women. During the pandemic the families could not bring the corpses to the home and had to bath and prepare them in the mortuary which was totally against the custom of the people. This is what one participant intimated:

I mean to say, he was bathed, and he was prepared and put in the coffin at the mortuary. If not, for the COVID -19, the deceased would have been brought home and there would have been a gathering, a wake-keeping of a sort and then the coffin would be opened for viewing the following day by loved ones till around 10 or 11 am then he would be buried. All these were not done because of the restrictions imposed because of COVID-19. All these bathing and preparation of corpse were done at the mortuary and placed in the coffin and brought to be buried (AMIDI, 06F).

Some families were scared when this ritual could not be performed so they poured libation to appease the spirit of the deceased.

In those days [during the pandemic], the people were not dressed and laid in state; the moment you [corpse] are brought from the mortuary, the elders in the house; when it happened that way, church services could also not be held. For the first one that came, the 25 people, that first wave, church services could not be held so, our elders would pour libation where libation was needed, they would pour libation to say, "it's not our doing, but because of the turn of events, we are taking you to be buried" – then they take you [corpse]. That is how it was done from March. I remember err, err, March 2020 that restriction came. (AMIDI, 05F)

However, it was observed in some communities that there was a gradual shift from bathing corpses in homes to the mortuary even before the pandemic hit. One participant at Nungua indicated his family had put a stop to bathing corpses at homes because of the health implications. This he attributed to the improper disposal of wastewater. However, the preparation and dressing of the corpse was still done in the family house.

Laying-in-state

Following from the preparation of the body is the laying-in-state. Often, the corpse is dressed in fine cloths and jewellery and laid-in-state for public viewing. This essential element of the funeral rites could not be performed, rendering such deaths as bad.

My father like this, he wouldn't have been buried in that way, someone who was 73 years, he's not a child. If we were to have his funeral, we would have brought him home, laid him in state, we would have gone and hired the people who lay bodies in-state, we would lay him on the bed in the evening, on Saturday morning... he has loved ones, children, they will come around him and if it is crying, we would cry, which shows he has children and when we are done, he would be buried nicely. For the burial we gave him, it wasn't any proper burial, because of the sickness (pandemic). When you go and lay him in state, you will be arrested... They were not befitting because people could not attend. (AP, IDI, 03F)

Not laying the deceased in state affected the way families mourned their loved ones. In Ghana, mourning is often dramatic—it includes loud wailing, singing of dirges, and wild gestures. Some people could even hire professional mourners to weep at their funerals.

So here, during the initial restriction for 50 people for funerals, about 3 people passed on in my community, 10 people or more could not go to the house of the deceased. Immediately, the corpse is brought from the morgue home, the Reverend Ministers come in to pray and then the deceased is buried just like that. It was disheartening and very sad. As a widow at that time, I would stand afar and watch and start crying because it was sad the way our beloved relatives were buried. It happened to one lady and a man I knew in my area. One time, my child went out to buy something, when she came back the corpse of someone had been brought and was being sent to the cemetery for interment. That was how bad and sad it was. At least, there should be people around who will mourn the dead. The coffin should be opened to at least pay one's last respect, but these things never happened during the restriction imposed on funerals. It was really a sad situation to say the least. (TP IDI 05F)

Often, people who died bad deaths are buried without much fanfare, thus, for relatives who had lived “good lives”, this was disheartening. In Ghana, grieving is communal and not private. Thus, the restrictions on the number of people who can attend a funeral affected how people mourn and grieve.

Wake-keeping

Wake-keeping, a practice common to both cultures, has been declining before the pandemic. The decline was instigated by the churches in a bid to cut the cost of funerals. The practice now is that viewing of the body may occur between 5.00 am and 8.00 am. In most rural areas however, wake-keeping may still be performed.

It hasn't brought about any challenges. Because these days people have stopped wake-keeping. They don't keep wake, then they bath in the morning then they come and sit for a while. Presently, wake-keeping has been stopped. Due to churches, because churches have stopped so the people have also stopped. If you see people keeping wake, then it is a young man who has died, his age mates, it is that one. But wake keeping has been stopped (NG IDI 03F).

Before the casket is closed relatives, friends, sympathisers and surviving spouses will give burial items known as *adesiede* to send off the deceased to the land of the dead. The burial items could consist of money, handkerchiefs, pieces of wax print and ring. These things are provided openly as a show of love for the departed. Normally, the spouse's items are presented last before the coffin is covered. Normally, among the Akans, the items being put in the coffin are made public by being announced over the loudspeaker (Boaheng, 2023). During the pandemic these burial things could not be openly acknowledged.

Burial service

One of the critical influences of Christianity on funerals in Ghana is the burial service, which has become an integral part of funerals. If the deceased is a Christian a burial service is performed before burial. This may take place in the church premises or in the home of the deceased, depending on the policy of the church. Due to the ban on in-person church services for almost a year burial services could not be performed for any of the deceased. For this study some priests and a few elders of the church performed a brief burial service in the homes of the deceased or at the cemetery.

Final Funeral rites (*ayie pa*)

The final funeral rites are perhaps the most important activity in funeral rites in Ghana. This entails the gathering of the family to receive condolences and donations from mourners. The activity is marked by music and dancing and handshakes (greetings). The restrictions and its accompanying uncertainty about when the pandemic will end made people decide to bury the dead and perform the final funeral rites later.

We weren't allowed to celebrate the one week and even the funeral. There were restrictions on the number of people during that period, but I don't remember the exact number. The body was sent to the cemetery after they brought it [from the mortuary], opened it and poured some libation. After the libation was poured, he was placed in the hearse and sent to the cemetery for burial and when they came back from the cemetery no one came to sit down, everyone went home. So, after two years which was last two years, September, the funeral was held, and we received monetary donations. (TP IDI 08F).

In the past, corpses were buried a few days after death, and the final funeral rites performed later. Among the Akan *dɔteyie*, which refers to the period a body is laid-in-state till the burial, could happen three days after a death has occurred. The *ayie pa*, which is the actual funeral occurred later (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2020; Agyekum, 2008a). The emergence of mortuaries enables families to both bury (*dɔteyie*) and perform final funeral rites (*ayie pa*) the same time (van der Geest, 2006). According to van der Geest (2006, p. 478):

The use of mortuaries plays a crucial role in the endeavour to make a funeral grand. The longer a corpse remains in the morgue, the more prestige is attached to the funeral. This is not only because a longer period allows the family to make more preparations for a successful funeral: the mere duration of the corpse's stay in the mortuary commands respect. People know the high prices of mortuaries and can estimate the amount of money the family spent.

Thus, there is the belief that burying a corpse a few days after death is not respectable and is liken to bad deaths. Such deceased are described as been "buried like a chicken" (w'asie no se akoko). Also, it is perceived that performing the final funeral several months after burial will not attract a lot of mourners compared to when the body is present (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2020).

Impact of COVID-19 on funeral practices

Low funeral attendance

One of the major effects of the COVID-19 restrictions on funerals is the poor attendance at funerals. A large crowd at a funeral is an indication that the funeral was very successful and well organized (van der Geest, 2000). Not only are the numbers important but the quality of the people in attendance also counts. This is evidenced by the attendance of high-profile people such as government officials, business executives, traditional leaders, chiefs, politicians, etc. A funeral that is not well attended is an indication of the low status of the deceased and the family. Below are some of the quotes from participants:

A lot of people wouldn't come so we cannot say there were a lot of people at the

funeral. It is said that funerals are about a lot of people coming for the funeral and not funeral donations. So, this caused changes in our funerals (APIDI, 05M).

It had a lot of effects on funerals.... the effect it had on it was the number of people that attended my wife's funeral. Had it not been for the sickness [COVID], the number of people that would have attended my wife's funeral wouldn't have been a joke. Because our lord [president] said 25 people but the number of people that came to where she was to be buried where more than 25. (TPIDI, 04M).

Reduction in funeral donations

Further, families reported that they received insufficient donations because of fewer people attending funerals during the pandemic. Giving donations at funerals is an integral part of funeral rites performance in Ghana. It is an anomaly to attend a funeral and not give donations (Agyekum, 2008a). The donations are given by sympathisers and mourners to the bereaved family to help them defray the expenses of organising a funeral. In the past relatives and mourners brought pots of palm wine to support bereaved families. With time, these gifts were monetised and money given instead of palm wine (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2020; Agyekum, 2008a). In modern Ghana, donations from mourners help bereaved families in defraying the cost of organising the funeral.

The COVID didn't really help. I am saying this because, my sister died earlier. For others, they may fall sick and die at the hospital where they would have incurred a lot of cost. It is during the funeral that we may recover some of the expenses incurred. However, due to the COVID, we didn't do any funeral, so we didn't get any money to cater for our expenses. Per the directives monitored by the assembly men and the chiefs, only 30 or less than 50 people could attend funeral during that time. If a lot of people don't attend the funeral, there would be less contributions hence we incurred a lot of funeral expenses during the COVID time. The people we buried during that time didn't help us. However, whatever God allows is what happens. If everyone also decided to come around and that led to the spread of the disease, it would cause a lot of issues. We didn't get a lot of people to give us financial contributions and support at these funerals during the Covid 19. (TPIDI 03F)

Reduction in costs of performing funerals

Despite the negative consequences of the pandemic on funeral rites some participants were happy with the simplicity that the restrictions had on funeral rites.

Like the way when someone passes and it's put in the mortuary, the cost to the children reduced. It almost made it seem we and our Muslim friends were moving along the same lines because after a short while [after death] we take him away [to bury] and that reduced the cost involved....

The family, what I have seen and can testify to is that, every family acknowledges that it's been helpful but the funeral is no longer like before the onset of the disease, they were not pleased with that at the time because the duration for the body to be laid for people to come and commiserate with us even at all if the community members arrive and the community members and family members and children to socialize before the burial was not achieved. So, they were not pleased with that. But I will say with respect to the cost, it was helpful. (AMIDI, 03F).

Some commentators have wondered whether COVID-19 would be the catalyst to bring about changes in funeral rites in Ghana.

Simplification of funeral rites

Further, participants noted that funeral rites became simplified during the pandemic due to restrictions on social gatherings and associated activities. As noted above, funeral rites typically required large numbers of people to participate and elaborate preparation which were either reduced or omitted altogether. Interestingly, some participants viewed this simplification as a positive development. They described the streamlined nature of funerals as less financially burdensome and more manageable, particularly for families with limited resources. In this regard, the pandemic temporarily alleviated the social pressure to organize extravagant funerals, which has long been a subject of critique in the literature on funerary practices in Ghana (Arhin, 1994; de Witte, 2003).

If I may share my opinion, the law that was passed did not say rituals could not be done but the number of people attending was what was given. So, if in this house the country says if you are having a funeral only 30 people should be present, then all the necessary customs to be done, the elders will make arrangement so that if it's 30 or 20 people that will be used, it will be done. So, the customs are there, whatever it is, for the customs, the arrangements were made. The way funerals were done in a loud manner that is what was not done, just a few people the way you know it was done in the past. Arrangements were made with the few people. (NGIDI, 05M)

As for me, it was very good it came. This is because, some people may not be financially strong but because it has been done for Tettey, they would want to do the same thing for Tetteh, yet they may not be financially strong. As for me, I am re-emphasizing on the fact that, the Ga chiefs should be firm to ensure that we could be able to have funerals like the way we did during the Covid 19. That should be how it should be done. This is because, you don't have money, yet you want to do more. (AMIDI 07F)

So, with me, I am always with the view that in performing funerals it is now a burden for us. It has become a big burden for us because even if you don't have, you are pressured to do something even if there is no funding and it becomes a burden. Left to me for the funeral, if there comes a law that funerals are cancelled that will be good. For me when the COVID came, I was happy because it limited some people's funeral and others. If COVID-19 had lingered, we would realize that even this funeral thing has no benefit. (APIDI 07M)

For these participants, the simplified funerals was a return to what they perceived as less ostentatious, more solemn and religious. Indeed, funeral rites in Ghana have been criticized for its extravagance (Boateng & Anngela-Cole, 2012; Bonsu, 2007; van der Geest, 2000). However, despite these perceived benefits, not all participants embraced the interruptions. For many of the participants, the reduced scale of funerals inhibited communal mourning and social recognition, which are central to funerals.

Reduced shaking of hands

Handshaking, as a culturally embedded form of greeting in Ghana, plays a critical role in expressing respect, solidarity, and communal belonging. As noted earlier, it is not merely a routine social gesture but a ritualized practice through which individuals acknowledge social hierarchies, convey empathy, and reinforce interpersonal bonds (Agyekum, 2008b).

Participants reported a marked reduction in handshaking due to public health protocols that discouraged physical contact. Instead, mourners adopted alternative forms of greeting, such as waving from a distance. As one participant noted, "now everyone that goes to funeral waves then they sit... that is the only thing which is done differently now." The absence of handshaking limited opportunities for close interpersonal engagement and weakened the embodied expression of sympathy and solidarity that traditionally characterizes Ghanaian mourning practices. This adaptation ensured compliance with health directives aimed at preventing the transmission of the virus. Ironically, this is the only change that persists post-COVID Ghana. Below is a statement from one of the participants:

errrr, oh okay, if I say I have witnessed any changes I will be lying. The only change I point out is how we used to greet previously. But this time the pandemic has cleared all those. Now everyone that goes to funeral waves then they sit. Ahaa that is the only thing which is done differently now which is helping on funereal grounds but from when the president said we can resume funerals nothing has changed. The only difference is the greeting which has changed (AP, IDI, 07M).

Discussion

This study examined the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on funeral rites in Ghana, focusing on how bereaved families adapted to the unprecedented limitations imposed during the pandemic and whether these changes have persisted beyond the crisis. The findings show how bereaved families negotiated public health restrictions while trying to fulfil cultural norms and practices. Among the Akans bereaved families had a muted one-week celebration, postponed it or cancelled it all together. Most families had it postponed indefinitely until they could perform the final funeral rites. Also, some families postponed the final funeral rites until the restrictions were relaxed; in one instance the funeral was performed two years later. Our findings show that some funerary practices were undergoing transformations before the pandemic. For instance, the one-week celebration was already being held several weeks and even months before the pandemic. Thus, it was easier for the bereaved families to postpone it. Also, the Gas utilised technology (mobile phones) in place of the mandatory three physical meetings to plan for their funerals. One of the notable innovations introduced because of the pandemic was live-streaming of funerals which allowed relatives and friends who could not attend in-person participate virtually.

Further, families navigated the restrictions by bathing the corpse and laying-in-state in the mortuary. Families that chose to bury during the pandemic had to bath, dress and lay their relatives in-state, at the mortuary. This practice affected the grieving of the bereaved families because such practice is reserved for deaths considered bad. A bad death is the one that occurs during pregnancy, drowning, suicide, falling tree or through fire (Adinkrah, 2022; van der Geest, 2004). Those who die such deaths are not 'brought home' and are not laid-in-state. Essentially, COVID-19 restrictions turned good deaths into bad ones, which affected grieving of bereaved families.

Dressing the corpse and laying-in-state at the mortuary disrupted the liminal phase in the funerary rites. van Gennep (1960) posits that funeral rites, which is the last rite of passage has three phases: the separation stage, the phase of liminality, and the phase of incorporation. The phase of liminality is where the deceased is standing at the threshold of spirit world. van der Geest (2006) extends this argument to describe how the Akans

use the mortuary to extend this phase. Before the emergence of mortuaries in Ghana corpses were buried almost immediately after death. The mortuaries enabled the phase of liminality, where the corpse is waiting to be buried and finally sent to the land of the spirits, to be prolonged. van der Geest (2006) argues that keeping the corpses in the mortuary longer added to the prestige of the families. When the body is removed from the mortuary and dressed and laid-in-state, it becomes a “symbol, a ritual object, which the family needs to perform a ceremony for itself” (van der Geest, 2006, p. 487). Thus, laying-in-state at the mortuary shortened the liminal state and denied relatives the opportunity to exhibit their excellence to the rest of society.

Though COVID-19 disrupted the funeral rites the findings showed that funeral rites were simplified and devoid of the large crowd and extravagance which characterises funeral rites in Ghana. Some participants who were pleased with the simplification of funerals hope that the practice will become the norm. There were calls on traditional leaders to institute regulations to curb the extravagance of funerals. Indeed, in the past attempts were made by some traditional and religious groupings to regulate funeral rites in their respective jurisdictions but have largely been unsuccessful. This study highlights the ambivalence surrounding funeral rites in Ghana. While many are concerned about the extravagance of funerals in Ghana, no steps are taken to curb the excesses. In his study of funerals in Kwahu, van der Geest’s (2000) participants acknowledged the extravagance of funerals in Kwahu but expected their own funerals to be grand.

Furthermore, findings from this study indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the practice of shaking of hands at funeral. Within funerary contexts, handshaking is particularly significant, as it serves as a primary means through which mourners offer condolences and demonstrate support to bereaved families (Bonsu, 2007; van der Geest, 2000). The act of physically greeting others at funerals thus contributes to the collective expression of grief and the reaffirmation of social ties. Ironically, this is the only change that largely persists in the funeral culture after the pandemic. The continued avoidance of handshaking at funerals in Ghana demonstrates how a temporary public health intervention can become institutionalized as a lasting social norm. Although COVID-19 triggered the change, the practice persists because it has been incorporated into everyday funeral etiquette through changing perceptions of health risks, practicality, and collective acceptance.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of COVID-19 on funeral rites in Ghana, focusing on how bereaved families navigated the COVID-19 restrictions, and whether the changes persist. The study findings showed that participants had to modify the rituals and practices to cope with the restrictions. This included postponing the one-week celebrations or the funerals, bathing the corpse and laying-in-state in the mortuary, and burying immediately after

that. This denied the bereaved families to grieve well and denied them the opportunity to use the body as an object to project themselves unto it. The study occurred among two ethnic groups, the Gas and the Akans. However, the data does not show any marked differences in practices adopted by both groups. Also, there were no significant difference between the rural site and the urban site. This may be because the rural sites have become peri-urban areas and thus were affected by the COVID-19 restrictions. This study contributes to the literature on the impact of COVID-19 in Ghana, observing that most of the changes that occurred were transient. The only practice that is enduring is the waiving at funerals instead of the handshakes. The plausible reason is that the restrictions were not long enough to engender total transformations.

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ORCID

Fidelia Nana Akom Ohemeng  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7779-8952>

Mark Kwaku Mensah Obeng  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6802-1965>

Stephen Afranie  <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4715-2377>

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