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Gendered mourning: A perspective of Akan death culture in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Death is the commonest, incomprehensible, and inescapable reality confronting humanity in all nations and cultures. However, cultures vary in their conceptions of death, grieving and mourning rituals. Among the Akan of Ghana, mourning and funeral obsequies are essential cultural and spiritual practices. In this article, we draw insights from our reflective lived experiences and critical literature review to explore mourning and death rituals among the Akan as a stratified cultural system that reflects and reproduces broader gender patterns of masculinity and femininity in Ghana. We discuss the concept and cultural significance of mourning and bereavement practices, and further examine how socio-cultural notions of gender shape mourning and death rituals in Ghana. We argue that, as in many social and economic spaces in Ghana, funeral obsequies and bereavement practices represent sites for enacting and reproducing masculinity and femininity. The deleterious health and psychological consequences for men and women are further discussed.

Introduction

Death is a universal human phenomenon. It is the most common, incomprehensible, and inescapable reality confronting humanity in all nations and cultures (Muchemwa, 2002). Over the years, researchers have been preoccupied with understanding death (Hauskeller, 2021; Heidegger, 2014; Levine, 1987; Luper, 2009; Mellor & Shilling, 1993; Seale, 1998), dying and bereavement (Brock, 2012; Leming & Dickinson, 2020; Stillion & Attig, 2015), and mourning and grieving rituals (Moyo, 2014; Muchemwa, 2002). Although the existing thanatological literature has highlighted the mortality of humankind or certainty of death (Heidegger, 2014; Schumacher, 2012), thanatologists have differed in their understandings of death. For one school of thought, for example, death is an end of life (see Belshaw, 2009; DeGrazia, 2014). For others, death is a means to a new life (see Clark, 1993; Sarpong, 1974).

Similarly, cultures vary in their conceptions of death and what happens when a person dies (Gire, 2014). For example, the Akan of Ghana believe that death occurs once in the life of an individual. However, they hold the view that not everything ceases with death, that there is an ancestral world—the afterworld. They believe that the souls of their departed loved ones go to live in *asamando*[1] (an ancestral world) from where they could be reborn (Aborampah, 1999; Adinkrah, 2022a). Thus, the Akan people believe in reincarnation. In the Japanese culture, however, the souls of dead people are believed to remain in their bodies after death (Masaki & Asai, 2013). These different cultural notions of death have significant implications for how societies mourn their dead. Mourning is a set of acts and gestures through which survivors express grief and pass through stages of bereavement (Winter, 2014). Mourning thus represents the culturally accepted expression of personal feelings that follow the death of a loved one (Gire, 2014).

Past scholarship has identified social status (De Witte, 2003; Strange, 2002), age and place in life cycle (Gire, 2014), and gender (Skrozic & Kijamet, 2022; Strocchia, 1991) of the dead as factors that shape how they are mourned. During the Florentine era in Italy, for example, gender played a key role in mourning. While Florentine humanists publicly eulogized dead men in funeral orations, praises of dead women, regardless of their wealth and erudition, were sung through private exchanges of consolatory letters

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(Strocchia, 1991). Also, in rural South Africa, mourning customs are reported to be gendered and women take up multiple and shifting positions during mourning (Kotzé et al., 2012). Widows (not widowers) observe *ukuzila*—a one year period of mourning to show respect to their deceased husbands (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007). Women thus mourn while men carry on with life after losing a loved one (Carton, 2003).

Although gender differences in mourning across cultures in Africa has been the focus of research (Fasanmi & Ayivor, 2019; Kotzé et al., 2012; Mudau et al., 2019), there are limited scholarly attempts to interrogate how specific socio-cultural notions of gender shape mourning and bereavement in specific cultural ecologies. While the pioneering study by Aborampah (1999) explored women's role in the mourning rituals among the Akan, and thus touches on the gender-mourning nexus in Ghana, the scope of his analysis was arguably limited as he focused solely on women. This hampers the broader understanding of how gender influences mourning and mourning rituals in Ghana and other African contexts. The current article attempts to bridge the gap in the literature by drawing upon our lived experiences and critical literature review to examine how socio-cultural notions of gender shape mourning and mourning rituals among the Akan in Ghana.

For the avoidance of doubt, the lived experiences we draw upon represent our collective reflective accounts of the Akan death and mourning rituals, based on our long-term active participation in the organization of funerals following the loss of close relatives and our continued close observation of Akan death and mourning practices. All the three authors are Ghanaians raised in Ghana and identify as members of the Akan ethnic group of Ghana, with rich lived perspectives of Ghanaian and Akan culture and deep knowledge of mourning and bereavement rites or practices. The first author currently lives and works at a University in Ghana. The second and third authors have spent over thirty years living in Ghana, and now living in the United States of America and Canada respectively. All the three of us have each had the responsibility of organizing at least one funeral as well as playing adjunct roles in the organization of other mortuary rites. We have attended and actively participated in several funerals of neighbors, friends, and families of Akan and other ethnic groups in Ghana. Our long-term and active engagement in several mortuary rites and practices have significantly enriched our ethnographic and emic perspectives about funerals and associated mortuary rituals in Ghana. In sum, we are a community of insiders whose emic perspectives about mourning and funeral obsequies reflect long-term engagement and everyday life experiences in the Akan cultural setting. We focus on the Ghanaian society for two reasons. First, mourning is a culturally significant event in the life of every Ghanaian (Aborampah, 1999; Newton, 2014; De Witte, 2003), and second, socio-cultural notions of gender significantly frame what people can and cannot do in everyday social practices, including mourning (Adjei, 2016; Susan, 2015).

The contribution of the article is bi-dimensional in that it adds to research that attempts to broaden the knowledge base for cross-cultural understanding of death and gendered responses to grief and offers valuable insights to clinicians who support people to cope with grief from cultural and gendered perspectives. First, we examine the concept of mourning in Akan society by highlighting the Akan beliefs about death and mourning, mortuary rituals, cultural players in mourning, and significance of mourning for the Akan people. Second, we delve into gender relations in Ghana. We explore how gendered socialization influences gender relations in social spaces in Ghana. Third, we analyze how cultural notions of masculinity and femininity are enacted during bereavement and grief. We particularly pay attention to roles played by both men and women in mourning and how they reflect and reproduce culture-specific notions of what it means to be a man or a woman in the cultural ecology of Ghana. In the fourth and final section, we conclude with our thoughts on gender and mourning in Ghana and highlight the implications of the gendered nature of death rituals and mourning for men and women.

Conceptualizing mourning in Akan society

Mourning and funeral obsequies are of cultural and spiritual significance for the people of Ghana, particularly the Akan. The Akan people constitute the largest population of Ghana (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012) with established rich cultural, metaphysical, and moral systems that date from before the 13th century (Wingo, 2017). The Akan people consist of the Bono, Asante, Adanse, Twifo, Asen, Fante, Akuapem, Akyem, Akwamu, Kwahu, Sehwi, Awowin, Nzima and Ahanta (Buah, 1998). However, Danquah (1968) noted that the best-known representatives of the Akan ethnic group comprise the Asante, Fanti, Akim, Akuapim, Assin and several of the Twi-speaking group of the then Gold Coast (now Ghana). As it has

been observed, there is no rite or event that requires so much ceremony, numinosity, and dread as does death in most African societies (Muchemwa, 2002). As is the case in many African societies, funerals in Ghana are celebrated with utmost grandeur and solemnity (Adinkrah, 2022b; Muchemwa, 2002). Akan mortuary customs commemorating an individual's death require that the deceased be given fitting burial and funerary rites. As is the case in most cultures, Akans express grief over the death of loved ones. Indeed, among the Akan, to die un-mourned is regarded as a piteous condition, with serious implications for the deceased, survivors, and deceased ancestors (Adinkrah, 2022a, 2022b).

There are degrees of grief and mourning depending on several factors such as the relationship between the deceased and the lineage or members of the lineage, the social hierarchy of the deceased, the age, and whether the death resulted from a terminal illness and long hospitalization. For example, among the Akan, there is a relatively higher grief potential for the death of a member of the minimal lineage (*yafanu*) than a member of the individual's patrikin group (Aborampah, 1999). Also, there are several distinct stages in Akan mortuary rites. At the lying-in-state ceremony that precedes interment, the corpse is neatly adorned with makeup, lavish clothes, and fine jewelry and ornaments. Earth interment or inhumation is still the most common form of corpse disposal in Akan society. The remains of the deceased must be properly buried in a fitting casket provided by the deceased's adult children. Except in the case of a bad death, the casket must be provisioned with grave goods, including money, which the deceased will purportedly use to pay the transportation expenses for the journey to the otherworld (Adinkrah, 2015a, 2015b, 2022b). Other types of Akan grave goods are items that the deceased will ostensibly use during life in the otherworld, such as towel, blanket, extra clothing, and toiletries.

The Akan dead must, by custom, be properly bewailed and lamented at every stage of the mortuary process. Akan mourning conventions permit public expressions of grief, except in cases of bad deaths. Following the burial, there must be a funeral ceremony to commemorate the death. Funerals are always public and spectacular events in Ghana. There is no such thing as private burial in Ghana as funerals involve mass gatherings of mourners, from far and near, who come to sympathize with the bereaved family. The purpose of the Akan funeral is to honor the deceased individual. Accordingly, the funeral is known in Akan as *ayieyɛ*, literally meaning an honoring ceremony for a deceased person. Described as the most important rite of passage in Akan society, Akan funerals are well attended events, bringing together large numbers of surviving relatives, friends, and neighbors of the deceased to express grief as well as to commemorate the death (Adinkrah, 2022b; De Witte, 2003; Gilbert, 1988; Van der Geest, 2000). Akans believe that a fitting burial and a lavish funeral are vital to speedily usher the dead soul into the afterworld. Perfunctory funerary rites, by contrast, make it difficult for the deceased to journey to the afterworld. Indeed, Akans are reputed around the globe for their sumptuous mortuary rites (Adinkrah, 2022a, 2022b; De Witte, 2003; Gibert, 1988).

Cultural significance of mourning in Akan society

Among the Akan, mourning has great cultural significance for the bereaved families, the community in which the death occurred, and deceased ancestors. First, the mourning process provides a medium for consoling individuals and groups bereaved by the death. At every stage of the mourning process, a wider community can be seen condoling the survivors with words of wisdom and encouragement to help assuage their grief. The bereaved, particularly men/widowers, are repeatedly counseled against excessive mourning and display of grief in public. Adequate and proper consolation has the potential to curtail suicidal ideation, suicide, and other forms of self-harm among those shocked by the trauma of death or loss. For example, it is a widespread Akan practice for a widow never to be left alone for several days following the death of her husband. Also, the young children of a deceased individual are continually reminded throughout the mortuary rites that the loss through death of the biological parent does not mean the permanent absence of a parent figure to cater for them and their needs. This is exemplified in the popular Akan saying, *agya bi awu a, agya bi te ase* (when one father is deceased, another father is alive). These consoling aspects of mourning are vital in a society where there is a paucity of professional psychologists, psychotherapists, and mourning counselors to play the role of grief therapists. Also, funerals provide opportunities for people to express grief over their own impending deaths and to recognize the universality and uncertainty about the nature and types of death that await everyone (Aborampah, 1999). The Akan expression, *mesu me wu da mu* (I am weeping over the day I will

die), or *obi ayie ase na yɛyɛ yɛho ayie* (one observes his or her own funeral rites at the funeral of others) underscores this point.

Akan mourning rites have important spiritual significance for the deceased. As previously noted, Akan mortuary beliefs maintain that proper and adequate mourning ensures that the soul of the departed reaches *asamando* in a speedy fashion. Persons who die bad deaths are denied decent and proper burials. In addition, there is a proscription of funeral ceremonies or public mourning for such deaths. Among the Akan, bad deaths include deaths by suicide, homicide, accidents, and mortality from culturally stigmatized illnesses such as tuberculosis, epilepsy, and leprosy (Adinkrah, 2015a, 2015b). It is believed that granting decedents of bad deaths the regular, traditional mortuary rites accorded regular deaths will lead to more deaths since bad deaths evoke the wrath of the spirits of the land. The spirits of the un-mourned are believed to hover around the earth, barred from entering *asamando* to join the deceased ancestors (Adinkrah, 2015a, 2015b).

Another important facet of Akan mourning rituals is that it helps maintain and strengthen bonds among members of the society. Among the Akan, burial rites, funeral obsequies, and annual events organized to commemorate death bring together individuals and groups, thereby fostering communal bonds. To illustrate, upon the death of an individual, lineage members, whether domiciled in the country, or residing at international locations, converge in Ghana to participate in funeral obsequies for the deceased. The mourning period provides opportunities to strengthen social bonds among persons who otherwise would not have had the opportunity to interact. Additionally, when members of the lineage come together to mourn a member, opportunity is created for resolving preexisting conflicts among members. It is a common practice among the Akan to set aside a special day, post the funeral rites, to settle all cases that the surviving members of the family may have against one another, and sometimes against the deceased. Sometimes, any misunderstanding between any surviving member of the family and the deceased may be settled before the funeral rites are held to allow the affected surviving member(s) the peaceful and spiritually unrestrained opportunity to participate in all mourning rituals.

Another major significance of mourning in Akan society is its role as a status-enhancer. Particularly in recent years, death rituals and commemoration ceremonies for the dead have become the site for the arrant display of lineage wealth through pomp and pageantry. Presently, the extravagant presentation and costs of caskets used for burials, along with the quality and quantity of entertainment and meals provided for funeral attendees, are used as mediums to showcase the wealth of a lineage and the status of the deceased. Adinkrah (2022b) describes how, in recent years, elaborate burials and lavish funerals are used by Akan lineages to impress the society at large, to the extent that people say that the funeral splendor is as much for the living as it is for the dead (Van der Geest, 2000). This phenomenon has generated such critical statements such as *abusua dɔ funu,* literary meaning the lineage loves the corpse.

Mourning rituals have financial consequences for families and individuals bereaved by the death. Akan mourning conventions require funeral attendees to make cash and in-kind donations to the bereaved lineage. Known as *nsawabodeɛ*, the contributions are to assist the bereaved lineage in defraying the cost of the burial rites and funerary obsequies. Thus, *nsawabodeɛ* significantly help reduce lineage members' dual burden of recovering from loss of a family member and the financial losses associated with celebrating a death. While some families are bankrupted by the huge financial expenditure, other families are enriched as the outlay of funeral expenditures is less than funeral receipts.

Among the Akan, failure to adequately mourn a deceased relative is regarded as a form of deviancy, a malefaction, with deep spiritual consequences for the persons (usually the *abusuapanin* or lineage head) charged with the organization and execution of the mortuary rituals. Akans believe that the spirits of deceased ancestors living in *asamando* are always present, albeit invisible, at key stages in the mortuary rites, including burial and funerals. If the deceased is not given a fitting burial and funeral or is displeased with any aspects of the mourning rituals, they will summon the derelict individual to come to *asamando* to explain the circumstances and reasons for the dereliction. This means that the person will sicken and die shortly after the conclusion of the funerary rites. This phenomenon is known in Akan as *samantoa*. Unfortunately, persons thus summoned cannot return to the living even if found innocent of the charges (Adinkrah, 2021).

A synoptic view of gendered relations in Ghana

In this section, we present gender role relations in Ghana generally, and among the Akan people of

Ghana specifically. Though we are aware of the rich diversity and nuances in gender role expectations among the various ethnic groups in Ghana, we discuss gender relations and expectations from the Akan worldview to purposefully emphasize the shared gendered relations in Ghana. Gender has significant impacts on the daily experiences of Ghanaians. It prescribes the talents people cultivate, the conceptions they hold of themselves and others, and the socio-structural opportunities and constraints they encounter in life (Akotia & Anum, 2015; Ankrah et al., 2020; Awumbila, 2007). In Ghana, like elsewhere, gender is socio-culturally constructed and constitutes an institution within which relationships are enacted. This institutional perspective locates gender as part of the dynamic social order outside the individual. Gender is therefore "the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 137). Thus, individuals learn (Levant & Rankin, 2014) and do or perform gender (Butler, 2011) within social interactions (Garfinkel, 1967) such as funeral spaces.

In the Ghanaian traditional set-up, gender roles and expectations are constructed and transmitted through cultural socialization by agents including parents, schools, and the media (Adomako-Ampofo, 2001), and reinforced through cultural products such as proverbs and folktales (Ahiakpor et al., 2017; Mariwah et al., 2022). Boys are socialized to recognize that being masculine is imbued with power that affords them control over anything feminine (Adomako-Ampofo et al., 2007; Anyan & Hjemdal, 2018). Virtues such as bravery, courage and competitiveness are considered masculine (Adinkrah, 2012) while nurturing, mothering and patience are attributed to femininity (Fiaveh et al., 2015).

Generally, among the Akan in Ghana, gender constitutes the basis for division of labor. Traditionally, boys are socialized to be men who work out of the home to provide financial resources for the family. Girls, on the other hand, are socialized to express concern or care for others including the elderly, the sick, and to keep the home. Girls are thus oriented to mothering roles. If one does not exhibit virtues expected of his or her gender, he or she is ridiculed or loses recognition in society (Adomako-Ampofo & Boateng, 2011). For example, a boy or a man whose lifestyle does not measure up to the prescribed expectations of maleness may be branded as *banyin-basia* or *kwadwo-basia* in Akan, meaning a "man-woman" (Adomako-Ampofo & Boateng, 2011). It is also believed that women are less courageous as depicted in common expressions such as *ɛmmaa suro adeɛ* (females are cowards). Consequently, a woman who veers away from prescribed feminine attributes into the domain prescribed for men may be branded *ɔbaa-barima*, the Akan designation for a woman perceived to have masculine characteristics (Adomako-Ampofo & Boateng, 2011).

Notably, the Akan are the only matrilineal ethnic group in Ghana. Unlike the other patrilineal ethnic cultures in the country, Akan society traces descent and transfers property through the maternal line. Although Akan society, like all others, is undergoing social change leading to alterations of gender roles, a division of labor based on sex persists in the domestic realm, albeit in modified forms. Traditionally, women performed domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, laundering clothes and most of the responsibilities associated with childcare while men performed heavier manual tasks and fought in battles. In traditional Akan communities, both women and men worked on farms; however, men performed the heavier physical tasks such as felling trees and hunting animals. In rural areas, hunting game is still exclusively a male activity. Consistent with the situation in matrilineal societies in Africa, intra-household gender power relations among Akan men and women tend to be fluid. Akan women's significant roles in political governance are notable as both men and women assume power in different situations. For example, while men serve as kings or chiefs among the Akan, women serve as queens with an additional responsibility to usually nominate the kings/chiefs. The queen position occupied by women in Akan society is of near equitable comparability to that of the male chief. Akan women thus relatively have more decision-making powers than women in other ethnic groups that practice patrilineage (Wrigley-Asante, 2008).

It is therefore instructive to indicate that the more traditionally strict gender roles and its associated behavioral prescriptions for men and women in Ghana, and among the Akan, are fast changing due to socio-political forces and structural changes such as education, globalization, civil society activities, women movement groups, technology, religion, among others (Wadei et al., 2019; Wrigley-Asante, 2008). For example, within the public space, the modern capitalist state of Ghana has introduced a more progressive female-friendly gender policies, such as increased female employment in the government sector, and increased political participation for women, aimed at increasing women's social and spatial presence. These

policies in Ghana have seen more women actively participating in economic and political activities that were traditionally reserved for men. For example, within the last decade, Ghana has produced a female Speaker of Parliament and three women Chief Justices of the Supreme Court of Ghana, a positive indication of a gradual shift away from established sociocultural gendered expectations and division of labor. The changing socio-political and economic structures help to problematize, challenge, disrupt and reconstruct the existing pathways into gender roles and responsibilities and open spaces for young people, especially women, to assume new gender roles (Arnot et al., 2012). For example, contemporary studies in Ghana reveal how new and emergent fathering ideals and gendered expectations are incorporated into local gendered ideals (Ampim et al., 2020). In addition to the values of providing for their families, Ampim and colleagues found that ideals of what they call involved fatherhood are beginning to emerge among Ghanaians where men accept caregiving duties and housework roles traditionally reserved for women in the home while some women pay children's school fees and provide food for their families.

Although emotions are partly biologically determined, the meanings of emotions and appropriateness of emotional expression are acquired in early life (Root & Denham, 2010). In the Ghanaian and Akan setting, gender is a critically important moderator of what and how children learn about emotions, and culture determines the appropriateness of emotional displays for males and females. Males and females are socialized differently on how to display and regulate their emotions. For example, based on attributes of masculinity such as courage and toughness, boys are socialized to suppress their emotions and deal with it privately while girls are oriented to expressing their emotions publicly. Research in Ghana shows that some Akan proverbs prescribe particular emotional norms and practices that promote masculinity. For example, a proverb such as "A great man weeps through his pipe," discourages men from expressing grief or crying in public as it demonstrates weakness or vulnerability and leads to loss of respect (Dzokoto et al., 2018).

From a social role theoretical perspective, gender stereotypical and cultural beliefs about behavioral prescriptions for men and women, and how they *should* be, emerge from repeated observations of the social roles men and women typically occupy within specific social spaces (Eagly et al., 2000). Similarly, the repeated gender role experiences of men and women in Ghana significantly influence mourning and death rituals. Previous studies have pointed out that an important feature of bereavement is heightened emotional intensity, and gender socialization processes have been noted to influence men's and women's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to the death of loved ones (Stelzer et al., 2019). As we show in the subsequent section, the daily gendered experiences of Ghanaians and the Akan people reflect in what they do and how they conduct themselves during mourning. Men and women enact roles and display emotions during death and mourning rituals in a manner that is effective and appropriate within the Ghanaian socio-cultural context. Mourning thus represents a significant cultural space for enacting and doing gender.

Mourning as a site for enacting and reproducing masculinity and femininity

As is the case in many social, economic, and political aspects of the Ghanaian society, mourning and bereavement is gendered according to strictly dichotomized roles for males and females. Mourning and funeral obsequies work to maintain gender hierarchies and represent sites for enacting and reproducing gendered practices and hierarchy in the Ghanaian society. The gendered nature of mourning in Akan society is palpable, profoundly evident even in the gender of the principal cultural players of Akan mortuary rituals and their responsibilities. Males are the major players involved in the organization and supervision of Akan death and mourning rites. A key player is the *abusuapanyin* or lineage head. Although Akan society is matrilineal where descent is traced and property transmitted through the female line, the lineage head is invariably male. In Akan mortuary culture, the *abusuapanyin* must be informed of all deaths occurring in the lineage. He must, in turn, inform the chief and other authorities of the polity (village or town) of all deaths occurring in his lineage, as and when they occur. The second major player is the *yipasohene* (chief mourner), who is usually a male. According to the customs and traditions of the Akan, which has also been upheld by the law courts, the body of a deceased person belongs to the family, always headed by a man (Agyepong, 2020). The family here refers to the extended or consanguine family into which one is born, which does not include the spouse(s) and children. It is the extended family, the rightful owner of the deceased, that decides at a meeting who the *yipasohene* (chief mourner) will or should be. The choice

of chief mourners, who are usually men, is very significant because he makes very important decisions regarding the funeral, such as choosing a successor to the deceased, ensuring that the expectations regarding how to fittingly mourn the dead are met, among others. His major role is to oversee the proper organization and execution of all rites pertaining to the death, particularly ensuring that the deceased is not only accorded a funeral that befits his or her status attained in life but also a funeral compatible with the social standing of the family in the community. It is the responsibility of the chief mourner (*yipasohene*) to ensure that all the appropriate customary practices and protocols are followed, and that the mourning rituals are esteemed.

Women's roles in Akan mourning rites, though extensive, are secondary to that of men. Consistent with the culturally prescribed nurturance role for women in the Ghanaian society, women are assigned the responsibility to bathe and prepare the dead body to be laid in-state for mourners to file past it. These are special women who are usually members of the deceased's family, and who are well versed in handling dead bodies. Another women-specific role is that of moirologists or professional mourners or wailers. Some Akan bereaved lineages engage the services of moirologists to add solemnity to the mortuary rites, particularly at wakes and at funerals. Among the Akan, moirologists are always females. At ordinary Akan funerals where moirologists are absent, it is the women who lament and wail during critical stages of the mortuary process. Men are culturally discouraged from engaging in loud sonorous wailing and weeping. The expression, *ɔbarima nsu*, which literally means "a man does/must not cry," importunes Akan men to refrain from such behaviors to avoid labels of effeminacy or unmanliness. This proscriptive norm in the mourning process is consistent with a cultural practice that generally demands that Akan men must not publicly display their emotions, even in the face of adversity, pain, and suffering. Research in Ghana consistently reports that it is unmasculine for a man to publicly express emotions such as fear, anxiety, pain, or sadness (Adinkrah, 2012, Adjei, 2016). Contrary to the culturally given masculine requirement for men to remain stoic and emotionally reserved during death and mourning rituals, a woman who does not weep or lament at the death of a close relative is suspected of being a malevolent witch responsible for the deceased's death (Adinkrah, 2015a, 2015b). The implication is that, as it is the case in many social, economic and political spheres of life in the Ghanaian ecosystem, the Akan mourning rituals could be culturally and psychologically coercive and oppressive against women. For example, when a woman's husband dies, the widow will have the additional psychological responsibility to publicly demonstrate that she is not the cause of the death of her husband. Such public demonstration could be incessant wailing and readily noticeable funerary or sorrowful countenance. The same cannot be required of a widower. In fact, as indicated earlier, men are generally expected to be emotionally strong by not showing any emotions such as wailing, at least in public, as that may be a signal that they are weak. To fulfill this cultural and gendered behavioral prescription, widowers are not subjected to the same ordeal as widows among the Akan, ostensibly reproducing and reinforcing the subordination of women in the Ghanaian society, even in mourning and funeral rituals.

While the cultural expectation for men to be emotionally restrained in mourning and other public spaces reflect unfair power hierarchy and patriarchal nature of the Ghanaian society, such expectations may have deleterious health and psychological consequences for men. For example, such expectations have led to men being emotionally burdened alone, and consequently lead to depression, stress, and suicide (Adinkrah, 2015a, 2015b; Andoh-Arthur et al., 2018). Emotional avoidance has detrimental psychological consequences, including mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression. Bottling up or withholding one's emotions such as crying could also create toxic masculinity—actions that discourage the display of emotions, other than anger, in men while at the same time encouraging behaviors that accord with male dominance in each situation (Kupers, 2005). Research suggests that women have better coping strategies and adjust to bereavement better than men partly because they tend to use more positive emotions, anxiety, and sadness words in grief narrative construction, whereas men tend to use more anger words to discuss their internal states during bereavement (Newman et al., 2008; Stelle & Uchida, 2004). The masculine requirement for men's desistance from crying during bereavement encourages men to suffer alone in silence when they experience emotional pain such as the loss of a loved one.

As stated earlier, cash donations have become an important part of Ghanaian funerals in contemporary times. The cash donations are presented publicly during the funeral, either by the donor(s) themselves or through public announcers engaged by the bereaved family to announce the donations on their behalf.

These public announcers are usually females selected because of their physical maturity, verbal articulacy, as well as demonstrated proficiency in the traditions and customs of funerals. Although both males and females make donations at funerals, the archetypal picture emerges from men donating vast sums of money to a bereaved family while women announce the donations and heap appellations on the male donors. The male-donor-female-announcer gender hierarchy at funerals is another instance of gender role (re)enactment and performance during death and mourning rituals in Ghana. When men demonstrate economic prowess at funerals and women remain on the fringes as announcers, they are both performing and maintaining a culturally given gender hierarchy in Ghana. As Adjei (2015b) argued, the public self-image and social acceptance of men hinges partly on their ability to fulfill their primary role as providers of financial and material support to both their conjugal and extended families. The economic resourcefulness of men and women's economic dependency on men in social spaces in Ghana, such as funerals, is so significant that a man's inability to measure up to this culturally defined role "poses a threat to a certain public self-image he hopes to sustain and deflates his masculine ego" (Adjei, 2015b, p. 424). For example, economic resourcefulness of women and the slightest sign of economic role reversal in marriage poses a significant social threat to men as it is perceived as providing a public challenge to the identity of men (Adjei, 2015b, 2016). Thus, while such gender hierarchy demonstrates the economic prowess of men at social spaces such as funerals, it also reinforces the unfair economic advantage of men in the Ghanaian economy. However, the verbal articulacy and the oratorial role of women during cash donations at funerals could be seen as an important gender empowerment indicator for women as it gives them voice within the social space of funerals and enhance their agency and self-efficacy (see Adjei, 2015a).

Conclusion

Despite its universality, there are variations in death and mourning rituals across cultures and contexts. There are also observed gender differences in death and mourning rituals in many societies of the world. It has been observed in some parts of Africa that mourning rituals can be socially oppressive to women as widows have responsibility to publicly perform greater number of death rituals than their male counterparts (Moyo, 2014). In this article, we have considered mourning and death rituals among the Akan as a gendered and stratified cultural system that reflects and reproduces broader patterns of gendered social practices in Ghana. As in many social spaces of life in Ghana, mourning rituals and the expression of grief generally adopt and engage with gender-specific norms and cultural notions of masculinity and femininity. We have discussed the concept and cultural significance of mourning and bereavement practices among the Akan of Ghana. We have examined the gendered nature of funeral obsequies and bereavement practices and how mourning rituals enact and reproduce masculinity and femininity in society.

There are obvious deleterious health and psychological implications of the gendered nature of death rituals for men and women. Research on coping with loss in bereavement contexts have indicated that, compared to widowers, widows are more socially supported and adjust better following spousal loss because widows seek relational connections in bereavement whereas widowers rely mostly on their own capacity and resources to cope with bereavement (Stelle & Uchida, 2004; Stroebe et al., 2001). The decreased opportunities for social support for men during loss of a loved one has been associated with their withholding of emotions, being less forthcoming about their emotional experiences, and making fewer references to emotions and social processes in their grief narratives (Stelzer et al., 2019). The wide gender disparity in suicidal behavior between men and women in Ghana may be partly a consequence of the significant gender differential regarding ways of dealing with loss, including mourning, and expression of grief. For example, in an epidemiological study of suicidal behavior in Ghana, Adinkrah (2012) observed that Ghanaian males were twenty-one times more likely than females to commit suicide. Also, males in Ghana were ten times more likely than females to engage in nonfatal suicidal behavior. It is also notable that life expectancy for Ghanaian males is six years short of that for females (WHO, 2023).

Given the extent to which socio-cultural notions of gender shape mourning, it is important for professional psychologists, psychotherapists, and mourning counselors to recognize the impacts of gender and culture when working with people dealing with grief and loss. Gender and cultural awareness will help professional therapists and counselors to understand how people in specific social milieu make meaning of and cope with grief and loss, and offer culturally competent support in ways that resonate with people in

specific cultural locations. Gender and cultural awareness will help prevent miscommunication that could lead to unintentional disregard of or insensitivity to the values, beliefs, and mourning practices of the bereaved (Lopez, 2011). Clearly, gender differences in the mourning practices of the Akan society of Ghana help illuminate the bereavement and grief experiences of men and women in specific cultural locations, and thus enhance our cross-cultural understanding of the shared gender beliefs and practices associated with death and mourning rituals.

Note

1. *Asamando* is the Akan equivalent of the afterlife. Akans believe that upon death, the spirit of the deceased journeys to the *asamando*, the abode of the spirits of the dead. Here, it takes up residence with other deceased members of the matrilineage, assuming a life very similar to the life they lived on earth. It is believed that the soul will reside here until they are reincarnated into the same matrilineage in their next life.

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