

DEATH IN THE ASANTE KING'S BURIAL RITES

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Abstract: *This paper analyses the metaphorical structure of the domains of life and death in Asante thought within the framework of the conceptual metaphor theory. The Asante data comes from metaphors instantiated in the burial rites of the Asante king. It describes and analyses the rites of passage of the king's first and second burial. Furthermore, it accounts for how the Asante people conceptualise life and death to identify the possible rationale behind their practice of ossilegium for deceased kings. One potential reason for the practice of secondary burial for the Asante king is their belief that life and death form a continuum instead of a break. Consequently, this gives rise to various metaphorical mappings that inform their thoughts, belief systems and funeral practices. The paper concludes that the Asante people believe that even in the king's death, he must be treated as a living being since "the Asante king does not die."*

Key Words: African Belief Systems, Asante king, Conceptual Metaphors, Funeral Practices, Ossilegium.

Introduction

Death is inevitable, but when an individual dies, his/her survivors have to cope with the emotional and social pain and find some means of disposing of the body. The most popular method of corpse disposal is burial. Burial has to do with the ritual act of placing a corpse into the ground. It is an interment, final disposal in which a dead body is lowered into a pit or trench and covered with soil. However, the idea of burial must not be limited to placing the body into a dug pit. Caves, buildings, and other confined spaces also offer various burial conditions, such as body exposure on the floor or benches, coffins exposed in selected locations, storage of bones in receptacles such as wooden and stone ossuaries or pieces of bone in jars. Some of these burial rites form significant aspects of the social and religious life of West Africans.

Many anthropologists have explored issues related to death and disposal.¹ They generally focus on secondary burial, where the body is

¹ Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry, eds. *Death and the regeneration of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); J. A. Brown, ed. "Approaches to the Social Dimensions of Mortuary Practices," in *Memoirs of the Society for American Archaeology* 25 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1971). Assessed March 29, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/>

disposed of in some manner shortly after death, but later the remains are retrieved and buried again.

Unfortunately, the reburial of human osseous remains has not been given the widespread attention that other dimensions of the anthropology of death have received. For example, primary burials, the commonly known and more visible mortuary practice in Ghana, involves the initial burial, with temporary or final severance of physical contact of close relatives and community members with the deceased.² However, secondary burial, reserved for royals only, is one most striking aspect of Ghanaian mortuary practice. It involves the secondary treatment of the bones of the deceased king.³ The Asante ethnic group pays attention to this ritual in the burial of a king, considered the “owner of the land” and a “living representative of the ancestors” and is a more respected member of society. Therefore, the departed king’s mortuary rites are more elaborate than that of the commoner. While the deceased king undergoes a secondary burial, which involves ossilegium,

[stable/21146707/](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X21146707); Robert Chapman, Ian Kinnes and Klavs Randsborg, *The Archaeology of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Sarah C. Humphreys and Helen King, eds., *Mortality and Immortality: The Anthropology and Archaeology of Death* (San Diego: Elsevier Science Publishing, 1982); Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington (eds.). (1991). *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Robert Hertz, “A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death.” In *Death and the Right Hand*, translated by R. Needham and C. Needham (Glencoe, IL., The Free Press, 1960), 27-86; Peter Metcalf, “Meaning and Materialism: The Ritual Economy of Death,” *Man*, 16, no. 4 (1981): 563-578; Douglas Miles, “Socio-economic Aspects of Secondary Burial,” *Oceania* 35 (1965): 161-174; Irene K Odotei, *Royal Rites: Death, Burial and Installation of an Asante King* (Accra: IAS Education and Cultural Heritage Series, 2001); Marleen de Witte, *Long Live the Dead: Changing Funeral Celebrations in Asante, Ghana* (Amsterdam: Aksant Academic Publisher, 2001); Henryk W. Zimón, “Burial Rituals among the Konkomba People of Northern Ghana,” *Institute of Ethnology, Czech Academy of Sciences* 94, no. 4 (2007): 43-58.

² Robert S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927); A.A. Anti, *The Ancient Asante King* (Accra: Volta Bridge Publishing Co., 1974); Kofi A. Opoku, A. K., *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP International Private Limited, 1978); S.E. K. Adizie, “The Involvement of Art in the Funeral Celebration of the Somey Traditional Area,” (Long Essay; University of Education, Winneba, 1993); Kwaku Ameyaw-Benneh, *Body Arts in Funeral Ceremonies in Asante*. Unpublished Monograph. (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, 1994); Paul Adu-Gyamfi, “Observable Artistic Changes in the Funerals of Adanse Traditional Area” (MA Thesis; Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, 2010); E.A. Asante, A.E. Asmah, and J. Adjei, “Art in Funeral Ceremonies: An Indigenous Cultural Identity of Asantes,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 3, no. 16 (2013): 102-109.; E. A. Addai, “End-of-Life Care, Death and Funerals of the Asantes: An Ethical and Theological Vision” (Licentiate Thesis ; Boston College, 2016); Mary Potočnak, “A History of Death and Funeral Rites: A Case Study of the Ga in Jamestown, Ghana,” (MPhil. Diss.; University of Ghana, 2017). Retrieved from ugspace.ug.edu.gh/bitstream.

³ This is known as ossilegium, the gathering of the bones of a deceased person after decomposition of the soft body tissue for placement in an ossuary.

this practice is absent in the burial of the ordinary Asante person. It distinguishes a king from his subjects.

Turner observes that,

Rites of passage are found in all societies but tend to reach their maximal expression in small-scale, relatively stable and cyclical societies, where change is bound with biological and meteorological rhythms and recurrences rather than with technological innovations. Such rites indicate transitions between states.⁴

This description fits the traditional burial rites as a form of non-verbal communication of the rationale behind the rites, instantiate metaphors. In the context of secondary mortuary treatment and bony relic keeping in Asante culture, a question arises as to what metaphors are instantiated by the various stages of the rites. How do these metaphors explain the notion behind this Asante burial practice?

The passing and funeral of the Asante king present several metaphors, which reveal the Asante conceptualisation of life and death. These rites of passage encapsulated in metaphors define the belief system of a people. The focus of this study is to visit the secondary burial rites for the Asante king, examining them from the perspectives of rites of passage. The goal is to extract metaphors from the burial practice for the Asante King and find out what these metaphors may say about the Asante understanding of life and death. The findings in this paper will contribute to the fields of tourism, anthropology, theology, linguistics, history, and biological sciences. It will further stimulate research interest in the indigenous practice of preserving corpses before and after burial among Africans.

To understand the practices from the participant's point of view, primary data was gathered through interviews and personal observations. Secondary data include information from earlier works on funerals in Ghana. The paper aims to account for the Asante metaphorical conception of life and death to identify the possible rationale underlying their practice of ossilegium for a deceased king. A potential reason is the Asante belief that life and death form a continuum instead of a break. This gives rise to various metaphorical mappings that inform their thoughts, belief systems and funeral practices.

⁴ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93.

Defining Secondary Burial

Jones defines secondary burial as “a case in which an individual is buried, a certain amount of time elapses, bones are exhumed, and the human remains are interred in the same or different place.”⁵ However, she observes that there is also the secondary manipulation of human remains, which does not always result in reburial.⁶ She concludes that a term like “secondary treatment is preferable since it describes that the bones underwent some form of treatment after their primary deposition.”⁷ The Asante practice of ossilegium lends support to Jones’ argument since after the treatment of the bones of the Asante king, he is not reinterred but kept in an open space in the mausoleum. Therefore, in this paper, the term ossilegium will refer to a secondary treatment of the remains of the deceased king rather than secondary burial.

Rites of Passage

Most African traditional beliefs and practices suggest that the people follow a system of transitional stages. The rites of passage are birth with the naming ceremony, initiation into adulthood, marriage with customary rites, and death with funeral rites. For Asantes, the rites of passage are four for females and three for males⁸ These rites of passage are celebrated by other Ghanaian cultures, the funeral being the most extensively celebrated.

Based on an in-depth study of the Asante mortuary rites for the departed king, we can recognise elements of the final rites of passage. Turner notes that a given rite of passage may be divided into three phases or stages: separation, liminality, and aggregation.⁹ According to Van Gennep, each of these stages is considered a “rite of passage.”¹⁰ This paradigm comprises three phases or stages that reoccur throughout a person’s life. These are: (i) rites of separation, (ii) rites

⁵ Olivia A. Jones, “The Study of Secondary Burial in Mycenaean Mortuary Traditions: A New Approach to the Evidence,” *Tijdschrift voor Mediterrane Archeologie (TMA)* 51, (2014): 1-13.

⁶ Jones, *The Study of Secondary Burial*, 9.

⁷ Jones, *The Study of Secondary Burial*, 9.

⁸ The four rites of passage are birth, puberty, marriage and death. The initiation into adulthood, puberty rites are only performed for the females, called *bragro*, which prepares females for marriage. There is no male equivalent for this.

⁹ Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, 93-112.

¹⁰ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago; The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 1-14.

of transition, and (iii) rites of incorporation. They are important for both the individual and his/her community. Rites of passage involve a change from one status to another. Examples include change from childhood to adolescence, single to married, life to death, etc. The change may be biological, cultural, or spiritual, as that society may identify or perceive it. The cultural construct of a society determines the content of its rites of passage. What an individual member of the community experiences is shared by the whole community or family in each rite of passage, either directly or indirectly.

The study of mortuary practices and perceptions of life and death can be investigated through this paradigm. An individual dies when the soul is separated from the body. A dead person passes through the initial stage, that is, “separation” from the living. Separation marks the cessation of a role or category previously occupied when a person is separated from society.

The ‘transition’ stage involves preparation of the corpse and the related mortuary rituals, according to the prescriptions of a given culture. The transition stage is one of liminality in which the dead body is a “transitional being” or a “liminal persona”.¹¹ Liminality is the transition period during which the person finds himself/herself between the two statuses where s/he is without social contacts and most vulnerable, because s/he does not belong to any of the social groups. The liminal phase of mortuary rites begins with the death of a person, continues through the burial, and ends when the mortuary celebration concludes. Turner sees liminality as the most important phase of rites of passage because liminal entities are neither here nor there;¹² they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial.¹³ The process of the liminal period is seen as an anti-structure where normal social rules are reversed.

Then in the final phase, the soul is reincorporated into the world of ancestors. The “reincorporation”, also referred to as the “aggregation stage” begins when the burial rites are all completed. It is the phase where the individual is reintegrated into society with a new status or position. At this point, the soul or body of the deceased is believed to

¹¹ Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, 95.

¹² Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, 93-112.

¹³ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (London: Aldine Transactions. 2008), 895.

have joined the afterlife or the world of the ancestors in the case of African traditional belief. At the same time, there is a reintegration of the surviving loved ones back into society from their temporal association with death.

Van Gennep notes that the separation phase represents the most prominent component in funerals, while the rites of transition and incorporation are not that important.¹⁴ However, Potočnik disagrees, noting that for ethnic groups in Southern Ghana, it can be argued that the rites of transition and aggregation, designed to incorporate the deceased into the world of the dead, are more emphasised.¹⁵ There is a similarity with the Asante people of Ghana. The next section deals with the theoretical background of the study.

Theoretical Background: Metaphor

In the last four decades, metaphor has been extensively discussed by many scholars of language and linguistics. One cannot imagine a language without metaphor and metonymy, two forces inherent in the basic structure of human speech.¹⁶ Traditionally, metaphor and metonymy have been discussed as stylistic devices in literary studies. They have been seen as mere figures of speech. The focus of cognitive linguistics is not on the creative usage, but rather in the strategies underlying both the creative usage and everyday usage. This section deals with previous studies and theoretical issues regarding metaphor and metonymy, the general descriptions of metaphorical mappings, image schema, and the typical metonymic domains.

Since the early 1980s, cognitive linguists have understood metaphor as a conceptual phenomenon associated with human thinking and behaviours. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but also our thought and action.¹⁷ We structure and mentally represent abstract concepts in terms of metaphor. In their Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), metaphor is “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of

¹⁴ van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 146.

¹⁵ Potočnik, “A History of Death and Funeral Rites,” 37.

¹⁶ Stephen Ullman, *Semantics: An Introduction to the Science of Meaning* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979), 223.

¹⁷ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), 3.

another.”¹⁸ There is a mapping from a “source domain” to a “target domain.”¹⁹ In other words, one concept (the target) is understood in terms of the other (the source).²⁰ That is, the conceptual domain (X) is the target domain (Y). A common example is when we speak about arguments in terms of war. WAR is understood as the source domain, which is mapped onto the target domain of *argument*. Therefore, mapping knowledge from the domain of *war* onto the domain of *arguments* aids in understanding one in terms of the other.²¹ A common metaphorical expression of the Asante people of Ghana is *ɔbra ye ɔko*, life is war. It suggests their tendency to view everything through the template of a war metaphor.

Conceptual metaphors divide into three categories, namely, structural metaphor, ontological metaphor and orientational metaphor. In structural metaphor, the source domain provides a relatively rich knowledge structure for the target concept. The cognitive function of this metaphor is to enable the speaker to comprehend target Y by means of the structure for the target concept. An ontological metaphor gives an ontological status to general categories of the abstract target concept. According to Kövecses, in ontological metaphors we apply substance, object or containers to perceive our experiences.²² In orientational metaphor, we make a set of target concepts coherent in our conceptual system. Kövecses observes that orientational metaphor is about basic human spatial orientations, such as up-down.²³

The Asante People

The Asante Empire, or Asanteman (independent from 1701–1896), was a pre-colonial West African state created by the group of the Akan people occupying what is now the Ashanti Region and portions of the Bono, Bono East and Ahafo Regions in Ghana. The Asante people are known for their rich culture, well-organised social

¹⁸ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 5.

¹⁹ George Lakoff, “The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor,” in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. A. Ortony (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 202-251.

²⁰ Kurt Feyearts, “Refining the Inheritance Hypothesis: Interaction between Metaphoric and Metonymic Hierarchies,” in *Metaphor and Metonymy at the Crossroads: A Cognitive Perspective*, ed. Antonio Barcelona (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000), 60.

²¹ Lakoff, “The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor,” 207.

²² Zoltan Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 34.

²³ Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, 35.

stratification and sophisticated hierarchy. The Asantehene is the sovereign and head of state of Asanteman. Today, the Asante monarchy continues as one of the constitutionally protected, sub-national traditional states within the Republic of Ghana.

As part of Asante worldview, the universe is unified. This physical world is inextricably intertwined with the spirit realm. Space is not bounded by the limits of the physical world in which we live. Space embraces this world and the underworld. There is a host of supernatural entities inhabiting the universe. Neither the inhabitants of this visible world and the unseen world nor the world of the dead occupy their sectors exclusively. All these worlds form a continuous universe. Like many parts of the world, the Asante perceive ancestors and the dead as guardians over the living. In the Asante belief system, the departed souls are in a position to help and protect their descendants and simultaneously maintain a place in the world of the living.

Mbiti suggests that in every African society, people are susceptible to what is done when there is a death in the family.²⁴ Death creates a physical separation between the departed soul and the living. This causes drastic changes, and the mortuary rituals and various funeral rites are intended to draw attention to that permanent separation and ceremonially bid the departed farewell. Painstaking care is taken to perform the funeral rites to avoid causing any offence to the deceased. The body is subjected to various culturally prescribed forms of treatment in preparing it for a decent burial.

Among the Asante people in general, the motive for honouring the dead with funeral rites might have been due to the fear of the harm the ghost of the dead person could do to the living. In the words of Opoku:

Funerals are great social occasions in West Africa. They generally involve whole communities who gather at these events to perform appropriate rites which help to strengthen the bond between the living and the dead. There is also a widespread belief in Africa that unless the proper rites and ceremonies are performed, the spirit of the dead person may not be able to join the ancestral spirits.²⁵

²⁴ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1975), 113.

²⁵ Kofi A. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP International Private Limited, 1978), 134.

Rattray observes that among the Asante, the goal of funeral ceremonies is to enable the dead person to progress to another stage of continuity of life.²⁶ Funeral ceremonies escort the deceased person into the presence of the ancestor. Thus, the performance of the funeral rites eases the dead person's access into *asamando* (the world of the dead) and brings immense satisfaction to the bereaved relatives. A funeral is the burning, burial, or other means of disposal of a corpse with the usual religious rituals. A funeral is a rite of passage dominated by the theme or idea of separation.²⁷ However, in the worldview of the Asante people, the funeral organised for their departed king is not absolute separation because "the king does not die".

Today, many Asante people often do not live within their villages. Many of them have migrated to cities and countries where greater opportunity to make a living is available. Yet, they are tied to their ancestral villages in Ghana no less than those who still inhabit them and owe allegiance to one king, the Asantehene. This sense of place and regard for traditional leadership is so ingrained in Asante culture and concept of self that, although an individual or family may live in other places for many years or generations, they never consider these places truly home. It does not matter how long ago the family lived in their own village in the Asante kingdom; that village is the only true home and the Asantehene is the Inspiring-ruler-par-excellence, the "Only one who sits on the Golden Stool", which represents the soul of the Asante Kingdom. In Asante thought, even when the king dies, he will still be their king. As Tweneboah puts it,

Traditionally, a chief in a Ghanaian community is the political leader of the ethno-tribal group. Because the political and the religious landscapes are enmeshed in African indigenous cultures, the basis for a chief's political authority is religion. Among the Akan of Ghana, the chief is a sacred person. The Akan chief then is the intermediary between the material and the spiritual universe.²⁸

²⁶ Robert S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), 147-166.

²⁷ Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, 147-166.

²⁸ Seth Tweneboah, "The Sacred Nature of the Akan Chief and its Implications for Tradition, Modernity and Religious Human Rights in Ghana" (MA Thesis; Florida International University, 2012), 1.

The question is, what makes the Asantehene so towering in Asante thought? The Asante people do not see their king only as a political head, but also a kind of divine symbol of the wellbeing of the kingdom.

For the Asante, death is a transition from the physical world of the living to the spirit world, or the abode of their ancestors. In the indigenous belief of the Asante people, the ancestors are ever-present. The king, having become an ancestral soul, can be invoked whenever there is a problem. The “transformed” dead king remains king, joining the departed kings to govern the affairs of the living, supporting the living king who consults them periodically as his religious duty. Thus, they remain part of the royal family, providing for them, giving them spiritual protection against evil, guiding the living, and punishing the living who go wrong. Therefore, the ancestors are revered, venerated and at the same time feared by the living. It is the responsibility of the living king to maintain constant ties with the departed king and other kinship ties through religious practices.

The King’s Funeral: Rites of Passage

The king’s funeral is a lingering process where the living carefully handles the dead body to keep it safe, overseeing its transformation from flesh to dry bones. At this point, the relatives complete the secondary funeral rites of bone collecting and decoration. That is when the king finally arrives at the village, his final destination.

The Separation Stage

A. Announcing the King’s Death

Among the Akan people of Ghana, of which the Asante is part, the funeral, *ayie*, is a ceremony involving “the removal of the dead from the midst of the living”. The king’s funeral is referred to as *ayikasec* (great funeral). When the king dies, his death has to be announced tactfully by the royal family. Though the death of a commoner is announced within a short time, the announcements of a king’s death is delayed, as it is supposed to be held a secret for a while. The announcement involves the use of euphemisms to soften the shock or pain or the tragic event and to show respect. The word *owuo*, “death” is not used in announcing the king’s demise. Even the euphemisms used of the king’s death projects a sense of sacralisation of the

politico-religious office and authority of the Asantehene. The Asante people have unique expressions for the death of their king. In referring to the death of a king, it is more polite to use the euphemisms: *odupɔn kɛsɛ atutu* (a mighty tree has been uprooted) or *w'ada* (he has fallen asleep). Linguistically, the ideology of space for the living and space for the dead shows, that for the Asante, the interaction between these two realms is constant and essential.

In a conversation, the Roman Catholic Archbishop Kwasi Sarpong, an Asante, told this writer in 2015, that the Asante believe the Asantehene does not die – he simply travels home to be with his forebears. In death, the king goes through a transition from the world of the living to the world of ancestors.²⁹ This core belief is so deep-seated that the Asante word for village, *akuraa*, is also the same as that for the world of the dead where the deceased king goes. Hence, when the king dies, his people also say, “*Nana kɔ n'akuraa*”, that is, “the king has gone to his village”. Other euphemistic expressions used to describe death include, *ɔkɔ n'akyi*, “he has returned to the place he hails from”; *watoa Nananom*, “he has followed his ancestors”, *wafiri yen mu*, “he has left our midst” or *ɔkɔ*, “he is gone”. Thus, while the Asante generally say, *owuo sɛɛ fie*, “death destroys the home,” and mourn when “the great tree is uprooted,” they also celebrate it as a grand journey, which their king undertakes for the benefit of his subjects in this world and the living-dead awaiting his arrival in *Asamando* (the world of the dead). For the Asante, this journey is up-ward. The Asante have a saying that, *owuo atwedɛɛ ɔbaako nforo*, meaning “all humanity will climb the ladder of death”. Thus, in the Asante concept of death, one climbs up.³⁰ The Asante people believe that in dying, the soul struggles its way up a steep hill, and so a gulp of water will speed up the journey, making it easier to bear. Therefore, those watching the dying person gasping for breath pour water down his throat. Upon the person's death, preparations are made for the washing of the body. The bathing is usually done with hot water, a new towel, and a new sponge.

²⁹ George P. Hagan and Irene K. Odotei, *The King Has Gone to the Village: The Death and Burial of Otumfuo Opoku Ware II Asantehene* (Accra: Institute of African Studies. University of Ghana, 2001), 60.

³⁰ Charles Owiredu, “Metaphors and Euphemisms of Death in Akan and Hebrew,” *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics* 10, no. 4 (2020): 404-421.

B. The Burial

After all the mortuary rites are performed, the corpse is carried to the cemetery, the Bantama royal mausoleum, and buried. Burial is often seen as an indication of respect for the deceased. The Asante people will rarely think about cremation because they would not like the body to be destroyed, hence the proverb, “*asase nkyiri funu*,” which means “the earth does not detest the corpse.” This first burial is his initial or primary burial. Primary burial, by way of simple interment of the body, is not sufficient to establish the ties binding the recently departed king and his royal ancestors in the afterlife. There, at the Bantama Royal Mausoleum, he meets with the royal ancestors before continuing his journey to his final resting place.

In order to become an authentic inhabitant of the village of the deceased Asante kings, the new entrant must complete his death process through decomposition, become skeletonised and ritually adorned with gold, in other words, be born anew. Here a notion of the regenerative capacity of the bone-setting ritual in secondary burial is emphasised. The next section describes the liminal stage, in which the king, though departed, is still not gone until his secondary burial is done.

The Liminal Stage

During the liminal period, the dead Asantehene is in limbo between his biological or physical existence and the spiritual world of the ancestors. After the first burial of the king, some time is allowed for the denudation of the body. It marks the liminal stage. The king in a liminal stage suggests an understanding of decomposition as a process of “still dying”. The king is in a state of some form of “partial death”. Thus, it takes time for the king to die, just as it takes time for the bones to lose moisture or wetness.

Whether in life or in “death”, the Asantehene is king. The difference in status between the king and his subjects could also be found in the special and elaborate mortuary treatment given to the deceased king as compared to that of the ordinary deceased person. In the theoretical sense of death in the context of our discussion, the king is dead but not fully gone. His initial or first burial separates him as a dead person from the living and places him in the liminal phase. At this stage he is neither alive nor dead. Thus, his first burial initiates for him a rite

of passage. Generally, in the secondary burial, a two phased passage moves the deceased person from the category of the living into the category of the dead. Therefore, the king may be said to be still alive because in the liminal stage he is still on his journey and has not yet arrived at his destination in Breman. Thus, the king's journey from Bantama to Breman represents the liminal stage.³¹

The rites of the secondary burial mark the liminal stage of his journey and his final arrival at the ancestors' village. It is at this point that he finally dies theoretically. The liminal phase of the deceased king is slower and more prolonged. The reason being that, since he is still "king," he must not be rushed on his way. He must be majestically walked, through elaborate mortuary rites, from the moment of his departure from the land of the living into the village of his ancestor-kings. There, he joins them, with his royal status still intact. Therefore, he is periodically consulted by the living king for guidance, favour, and protection. So, we can say, the king starts his journey at the first burial and ends it at the second burial.

The Incorporation Stage

A. Asante Ossilegium

The stage of incorporation is marked by the gathering of the bones of the king unto the elders (*nananom*) in the same burial place. This marks the final traditional burial rites when the remains of the king are removed from the Bantama Mausoleum, the place of primary burial, to Breman for the secondary burial. In the physical sense, his body arrives at the end of its journey.

After the first burial of the king, some time is allowed for the denudation of the body. The first burial, being the primary burial, involves the carrying of the body to the mausoleum, and that is what the public sees. The final ceremony or secondary burial marks the accomplishment of bodily decay as shown by the dry bones, the journey of the soul to the other world, and the work of mourning. As Hertz puts it, "death as a social phenomenon consists in a dual and painful process of mental disintegration and synthesis. The performance of the secondary burial rites, which also involves ossilegium, marks the end of

³¹ Breman is a town the Kumasi Metropolitan District. Bantama is a suburb in Kumasi, the regional capital of the Ashanti Region of Ghana.

the liminal phase and initiates the stage of incorporation.”³² Rattray explains that the purpose of the ceremony is also to preserve the king’s remains more carefully and reverently in order that the remains might serve as a medium for his spirit when it is summoned to join his living people in times of national reunion or emergencies.³³

The secondary Asante mortuary rites for the departed king is not visible to the public. Only a few family heads closely connected to royalty have the privilege of observing the final rites of ossilegium. This writer, being a typical Ghanaian, knows too well that no stranger will be told everything that happens in the mausoleum, not even an ordinary Asante will know it. A lot is sacred, shrouded in secrecy. The practice of ossilegium is not unique to the Asante people only. The Bono people also practice this burial ritual for their kings. The Bono people are an Akan group north of Asante. Ameyaw-Benneh confirms that in the olden days, the faces of dead Bono chiefs were smeared with gold dust.³⁴ All openings of the dead body were filled with the same. Three years after burial, the coffin of a bono ruler was opened and the skeleton removed, cleaned and oiled. It was then given to a goldsmith to join the bones together with gold wire. The joined skeleton was dressed in beautiful clothes and adorned with a profusion of gold jewellery. It would then be put in a coffin and carried to its final resting place, the royal mausoleum, in a sacred grove outside the town. It is similar to the account of Rattray about ancient Asante kings whose skeletons were put in miniature coffins and kept at their permanent resting places at *Ban mu* (the royal mausoleum). According to Rattray, the dead Asante kings were given special attention in burial.³⁵ Their bodies were carefully and reverently preserved in order that the bodies might serve as a medium or shrine for their spirits when they are summoned to return to the aid of their people in times of national reunion or national emergencies.

When it comes to the burial of the Asantehene, two locations in Kumasi, Breman and Bantama are very prominent. Before the Asante kingdom moved the final destination of the deceased king to Breman,

³² Robert Hertz, “A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death.” In *Death and the Right Hand*, translated by R. Needham and C. Needham (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1960), 27-86.

³³ Rattray. *Religion and Arts in Ashanti*, 1040.

³⁴ Ameyaw-Benneh, “Bono-Ahafo Funerary Arts.”

³⁵ Rattray. *Religion and Arts in Ashanti*, 1040.

Bantama was the final place. It used to be the second and last burial place of the ancient Asante kings. The Mausoleum in Bantama is a long building, partitioned into small cells. One could access these cells on a simple gallery. Covering the entrance of each cell was a silk curtain. Each cell was a sacred space occupied by the skeleton of a King. What has been described as the Bantama ritual is a secondary burial ritual.³⁶ That mortuary ritual was a process of exhuming the bones of a late king from his primary burial location, a temporary royal burial place near the palace, and moving it to Bantama, his final resting place. The different sections of each skeleton had been meticulously and artfully joined together with gold wires and laid in a coffin decorated with slabs of gold. Placed in each cell for the skeleton were a chair, a table, a water jug and a dish. Around each coffin are a sword, a musket, sandals, and some other personal belongings that had been the favorites of each king in his lifetime.³⁷

The ritual was performed at midnight. That was also the time of offering a drink to the old, departed kings. The successor-king arrives at the most sacred place of the mausoleum, where each royal skeleton has been laid in cells, ready with the king's food and drink. The king takes off his sandals and gold ornaments, adjusts his cloth around his loins and enters the first cell or cubicle. He starts the ritual by pouring libation. This prayer entails a long recital invoking the spirit of the particular departed king and telling of his exploits. The successor-king then implores this ancestor for his blessings for the land and the people. In so doing, the king asks each ancestor to maintain the healthy and prosperous relationship that had existed in time past between them and the living. Following this, he offers the ancestor his drink of gin.³⁸

The Asantes use coffins in their burial rituals within royal circles. In his own account, Rattray states:

I had the privilege of being shown the coffins containing the skeletons of two of the Ashanti kings, Karikari and Mensa Bonsu. These are more sacred, perhaps, than the Golden Stool and its regalia, in

³⁶ Anti, *The Ancient Asante King*, 40.

³⁷ Anti, *The Ancient Asante King*, 40.

³⁸ Anti, *The Ancient Asante King*, 40-41.

the pursuit of which our blood and treasure had vainly been poured.³⁹

What Rattray refers to is what can be described as ossilegium for ‘retired’ Asante kings. In the Asante practice, the sacred royal skeletal relics, viewed with awe and reverence, are preserved and kept in royal mausoleums. We can differentiate these bone-carrying coffins from the ones carried from the palace and used earlier in the initial or primary burial of the king. Rattray’s statement expresses the awe he felt for the relics of these Asante Kings. The Asantehene is not buried; instead, he kept in a wooden coffin in the royal mausoleum. For want of a better word to describe these sacred coffins, they could be referred to as ossuaries because they are meant for carrying the royal sacred skeletons. These royal ossuaries are quite short, not more than four feet long, and hexagonal in shape. Rattray affirms that the material used in making them was covered with green silk, studded with gold disks or rosettes, with varying designs. Each of the coffins had seven of the disks on it.⁴⁰ They were covered with black velvet.

B. Breman, the Final Destination

After the liminal period of exclusion comes integration into the family of royal ancestors at *Ban mu*, the royal mausoleum. The deceased king does not arrive at the village of his royal ancestors, until he has become like them in form – sacred bones. All the departed kings underwent the same experience in their journeys to the perpetual village. They were first buried to ensure the denudation and desiccation of their bones. Second, their bones were exhumed, ornamented and re-buried in wooden hexagonal coffins, sort of ossuaries, their final resting place.

At Breman, there is a courtyard which is a restricted area, though a few Asantes can access it. Then, there is a sacred place *Ban mu* where some of the chiefs can enter. Thus, *Ban mu* implies the idea of home or village for the departed Asante kings. Beyond this is the Most Sacred Place where the royal osseous remains of the kings are congregated. It is a sort of monarchical sacred space reserved for both the living and departed kings. Only the Asantehene and a few other chiefs or individuals with specific religious roles have access into this “Holy

³⁹ Rattray, *Religion and Arts in Ashanti*, 160.

⁴⁰ Rattray, *Religion and Arts in Ashanti*, 161.

of holies”. The arrival of the departed Asantehene at Breman and becoming resident in the “Holy of holies” is meant for both the reburial after skeletonisation and at the same time, a sort of ‘new birth’ into the afterlife. Finally arriving home, the king has completed his death process and is now reborn as ancestor-king. Thus, the secondary burial ritual is a type of re-consecration rite into kingship in the afterlife, in which the departed king is ushered into ancestral chieftaincy.

In the mausoleum, the practice of ancestor veneration is clearly noticeable in the mortuary rituals observed in the secondary burial and the bony relic in order to have perpetual spiritual and physical access to their kings. On certain special occasions, the living king, playing a priestly role, contacts the departed kings in their abode in Kumasi on behalf of the Asante state. The secondary burial rites render sacred both the skeleton and the soul of the king. The spirit behind the skeletonised ancestors is believed to possess feelings for care, hunger, thirst, anger, and satisfaction. He is now a spirit and must be treated with awe, reverence and accorded all the honour as a ‘majesty’ through a healthy devotion to the skeletal point-of-contact with the living. He can communicate advice or warnings and mete out punishments or confer blessings. He still has some of the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of a living Asantehene – He is adorned with gold, has a living wife, fed, consulted for advice; prayed to for fertility of plants, animals and human beings, removal of calamity, ensuring victory in war and protection from enemies and evil. Hence, he deserves royal visits from the living Asantehene during relevant festivals.

Metaphorical Conceptualisation of the Burial Rites

We may interpret the Asante practice of ossilegium within the framework of conceptual metaphors. Several metaphors are instantiated at the various stages of the rites of passage relating to the burial of the Asante king. Before the separation phase, the ritual of giving water to the dying person indicates that ‘death is a steep hill’ and ‘dying is climbing.’ Dying is a painful climb uphill in which the departing person struggles for breath. Thus, the ‘dying person is a struggling climber.’ In the stage of separation, we see several other metaphors: ‘death is a separation,’ death is a departure,’ ‘death is a struggle,’ and ‘the afterlife is hilltop.’

The Asante would not say the king is dead, because conceptually, he remains alive both here and in the afterlife. In the liminal state, His Majesty is *ɔkwantuni*, “a traveler”. The euphemism, *watoa nananom*, “he has followed the elders/ancestors,” is used in describing his death. In the liminal stage he is neither alive nor dead. In a sense, he has not finished dying. Death in the liminal stage represents the dying process of the king as his body decays. Thus, although an individual died at the stage of separation, he is not entirely dead until he has been skeletonised. This indicates that ‘death is a slow journey.’ Other metaphors instantiated in the liminal stage are ‘dying is a struggle,’ ‘dying is climbing,’ ‘dying is decomposition,’ ‘dying is skeletonisation’ and ‘dying is a journey.’ It can also be said that ‘the dead is a traveler’ until he finally arrives home in the form of a skeleton.

Each time a person loses body fluids, his or her life is threatened because dehydration mimics illness and death. In some cultures, for, the Jewish and Indonesian, the notion of loss of body fluids as representing dying is evident in their practice of ossilegium. Death is a gradual process which ends when all the moisture is gone. Thus, dying has to do with a gradual denudation and desiccation of the bones. Dying, which is characterised by the loss of body fluids, also instantiates the metaphor ‘dying is body leakage.’ Since completely dry bones represent “total death”, we also have other metaphors like, ‘death is a body dessicant,’ or ‘death is a dryer’ and ‘death is a denuder.’

The experience of the corpse at the stage of incorporation instantiates such metaphors as: ‘Life is incorporation.’ The Asante euphemism, *Nana kɔ n’akuraa*, “the king has gone to his village,” also suggests the metaphor ‘Life is an arrival,’ because in this final phase of the rite of passage, the traveling king finally arrives at his village in the “afterworld”. Hence, ‘the afterlife is a village.’ However, there arises a paradox here because we may conceptualise ‘death as an arrival’ and ‘death as incorporation’ at this stage because in a sense, the king is finally dead but now alive with the completion of the final funeral rites of the secondary burial. We also see the metaphor ‘death is a promotion,’ because in this stage, the king assumes a higher status in the sense that he becomes ancestor, enjoying the veneration of the living. The concrete experience of the physical gathering of the boney relics of the dead king unto the assembly of the older kings in the Breman Mausoleum, becomes a metaphor for the abstract incorporation of the spirit of the king into the community of the ancestors in

Asamando, the world of the dead. This instantiates such metaphors as ‘*asamando* is *banmu*’ and ‘the afterlife is a mausoleum.’ Ossilegium, as practiced among the Asante people and elsewhere, basically points to the notion that ‘moisture is life,’ as implied by the common notion that “dry bones” are indicative of complete death. Therefore, the dry skeleton of the king suggests the metaphors, ‘death is dryness,’ which implies that ‘life is wetness.’

In summary, the metaphors above suggest that in Asante thought, the death of a king is a slow majestic journey in which he travels from one life to another, still “alive”. This long journey begins when his breath is gone and ends with his dry bones. All the metaphoric expressions involving separation, departure, arrivals, incorporation, and climbing, indicate the notion that death is a journey. Destination terms like *asamando*, *Ban mu*, village and mausoleum also indicate the idea of death being a journey. In other words, death is a movement to a specified destination. It is the living that embarks on a journey, hence death being a continuation of life. The metaphoric expressions including, wetness, moisture, leakage, decomposition, denudation, desiccation, dryness and skeletonisation indicate that dying is a slow process involving a gradual loss of moisture, and that if there is wetness, there is life. Death ends with total dryness. However, there is a sense in which dry bones represent both death as the end of the journey and new life among the ancestors. The final burial rites of incorporation are simultaneously, a farewell ceremony and welcome ceremony.

There is no connotation of the death of the king as ‘loss’ or ‘the end’ in the metaphors extracted from the rites in this study. His is a continuation of life. With the consequence of a positive view of life, the Asante people see incorporation as a new joyful life mapped onto the domain of death. Thus, ‘death is a blissful life.’ The expression of the king’s death as a promotion carries connotations of life and change of status to rule from the “village” of the ancestors as Asantehene Emeritus, for he who sits on the golden stool, the sacred throne, does not retire when alive.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to examine the metaphors instantiated in the rites-of-passage regarding the secondary burial for the Asantehene to see how they help in interpreting the Asante concepts

of life and death. The findings suggest that the metaphors instantiated by the rites of passage indicate that the Asante people understand death as a continuation of life though in another form. In other words, life and death form a continuum instead of a break. This lends credence to the Asante notion that “the Asantehene does not die”.

Before the first burial, which is the stage of separation, every effort is made to prevent the body from decomposition. However, as soon as the initial burial is performed, the corpse enters the stage of liminality where the condition necessary for the decomposition of the body is provided in initial internment because there is the need for denudation and desiccation of the bones before the secondary burial. In the final or secondary burial, the deceased is ushered into the final stage of the rite of passage. This is the stage of incorporation, representing the finality of death. It is the phase in which the Asantehene is formerly welcomed spiritually, as it were, into the community of the ancestral spirits and physically incorporated into the home of the ancestors in Breman, Kumasi. Thus, death, as a journey for the deceased king is a gradual process that eventually ends with arriving home to be with the forebear-kings. As one Asante euphemistic expression of the king’s death notes, “the king is gone” to be gathered with the ancestor-kings.

We have discovered that the passing and funeral rites of the Asantehene instantiates various metaphors. Analysis of these metaphors allows us to identify the Asante conceptualisation of life and death. In summary, the metaphors indicate that, death is simply another form of life in which the king’s status as ruler does not change. It is just the location from which he rules that changes. Death does not terminate the dynamic relationship between the departed king and his living subjects but rather strengthens and perpetuates it. This understanding can also be affirmed by the fact that every now and then, the living king visits the departed kings in the mausoleum, consulting them for guidance and support for his socio-politico-economic and religious endeavors. Since the Asante people hold their royal ancestors in high esteem, they see the boney (osseous) relics of their deceased kings as sacred and keep them as a remembrance of their cherished forebears. They also do this in respect of the spiritual power of the departed kings who are believed to have the capacity to care for their descendants and ‘former subjects’.

For the Asante, death is the continuation of life. The king's death is only a journey through the stages of the decomposition of the body, denudation of the bones, desiccation of the skeleton, decoration of the skeleton and the laying of the decorated skeleton in an ossuary stored among others in *Ban mu*, the final place of rest for the kings in Kumasi. The end of the secondary burial rite simultaneously marks the end of the death of the king and his 're-birth' as an ancestor-king in *Asamando*, the abode of the dead. The practice of royal ossilegium and the constant contact of the living royals with the "sacred boney relics" of the departed royals can be understood to be the most visible and profound memorable way in which the Asante people give cultural and religious expression to their perpetual relationship with their ancestor-kings. By this rare monarchical mortuary rite, they see themselves as subjects to their king, whether he is alive or dead.

The Asante mortuary practice described in this paper is a contribution towards a better understanding of ossilegium in the African context. The paper has contributed additional insights into the existing knowledge of the death and funeral rites of the Akan ethnic group of which the Asante is part. The study also represents an attempt to preserve some of the African traditions which are in the form of customs, rituals, and ceremonies. It opens another door for research into the possible traditional thinking behind various African traditional ritual practices through the lenses of the metaphors the practices instantiate. The knowledge gathered in this study is expected to be an important reference material for researchers in related fields, tourists, cultural policy formulators, religious leaders as well as anthropologists. Finally, it is hoped that the research will stimulate further enquiries into metaphors and metonymies in other rites of passages such as birth, graduation, marriage ceremonies and widowhood rites. It is possible that the findings in such researches may also suggest that rites of passage instantiate metaphors and metonymies that can help explain the rationale behind the rituals and ceremonies of a people.

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