

4C The Ghanaian Fantasy Canoe Coffin: A Box with Proverbs

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When unmitigated against, death may mark the end of many people's dreams, but throughout the world many families use burials and associated grave goods to ensure that the wishes of the dead are met. Beyond wishes, funerary objects are used to communicate and celebrate deceased's occupation, familial identity, and social position (Otto 2019). In Ghana in West Africa, a combination of chance and curiosity in the face of the changing colonial and postcolonial dynamics surrounding death, leadership, and community relationships led to a twentieth-century tradition of elaborate fantasy coffins.

Under the British colonial law dating back to 1888, Ghanaians were forced to use public cemeteries, as opposed to the traditional, relatively private, burial under house floors. By the 1930s, the people of Ghana were already warming up to the idea of abandoning basket- and mat-wrappings in favor of coffins (Gundlach 2017). The transition to fantasy coffins was spurred by the Ga people's long tradition of figurative palanquins that were used exclusively by the chiefs (Secretan 1995; Bonetti 2010). A palanquin is a one-passenger box or seat carried on two horizontal poles by four or six bearers. Both figurative palanquins and fantasy coffins relied on a deeply rooted practice of commissioning crafts, but skewed access to wealth and power meant that the elites were the ones who had the luxury and political muscle to commission the best works.

For a long time, Ghanaians and their neighboring communities used palanquins (also commonly known as sedan chairs) as figurative royal coffins. In the 1950s, among the Ga people, the dominant ethnic group of the region of Accra in Ghana, what started off as a routine figurative royal palanquin for a local chief turned into reality when a cocoa-pod-shaped palanquin was used as the actual coffin of the commissioning chief, who died unexpectedly before the festival (Kreamer 1994). The unique coffin drew many admirers beyond royalty. Inspired by the enthusiasm of the crowds at the chief's funeral, Seth Kane Kwei (1925–92), one of the cocoa-pod-coffin carpenters made an airplane-shaped coffin for his grandmother who died not long after the first palanquin coffin event. His grandmother grew up in Teshie, a coastal suburb near Accra's airport and was fascinated by the idea of planes, but she never got the chance to fly. By burying her in an airplane-shaped coffin, Kane Kwei ensured that his grandmother would fly into eternity but, more importantly, this seeded the idea that even commoners can choose to celebrate death in palanquin coffins.

Several local people began to request customized fantasy coffins soon after the airplane coffin event (Figure 4.14). As the practice became widespread, the Ga people gave these coffins a new name: *Abebuu adekai* meaning

boxes with proverbs. The motifs of the coffins revealed a number of things: (1) the message for perpetuity of one's profession (for instance, a fisherman would be buried in a boat-shaped coffin); (2) the dreams and aspirations of the deceased, such as a plane or a luxurious car; (3) character or temperament, such as a coffin in the shape of a red-hot chili pepper for an assertive person; or (4) status (for instance, certain animal shapes such as the elephant were reserved for high-ranking officials) (Van Der Geest 2000; Otto 2019; Gundlach 2017).

The tradition never lacked admirers and soon its popularity spread beyond the borders of the Ga people of the Accra region, to the Ashanti region (Kumasi), the Ewé region, and even as far as parts of Togo. It also did not take long for the fantasy coffins to catch the attention of Western museums which began collecting and commissioning several examples for their own museum displays in the 1970s. Seth Kane Kwei remained one of the household names, together with a few others, such as Joseph Ashong, popularly known as Paa Joe (Otto 2019). Kane Kwei and Paa Joe have since been featured in several art festivals, shows, and galleries around the world because of these fantasy coffins. It was within this context that the canoe-shaped Ghanaian Fantasy Coffin which appears in this exhibition was produced by Seth Kane Kwei himself in 1989. The shape is consistent with the motifs of Ga fishermen, who used to carve and place a little dummy-canoe on the graves of their deceased, long before fantasy coffins were introduced (Potocnik 2018). The canoe-shaped coffin was on display at a gallery in Los Angeles, and was produced just three years before the death of Kane Kwei. His family continued the workshop and its tradition, and the workshop is now managed by his grandson, Eric Adjete Anang, an artist and master coffin maker himself (<http://www.kanekwei.com/past-events>). The business is generally a high earner, with a typical fantasy coffin costing nearly as much as an average Ghanaian earns in a year.

The commissioning and acquisition of fantasy coffins for museum and art gallery displays necessitated additional changes. For instance, coffins destined for burial were typically made from light wood such as *Altonia boonei* but those manufactured for Western museum displays are now made from hard wood such as *Terminalia superba* or African mahogany (*Khaya ivorensis*; <http://www.kanekwei.com/past-events>).

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Death as Politics and Politics as Spectacle

For some societies, life goes with death in such an important way that life cannot go on if death is not "performed" first. The spectacularity and exuberance of some mortuary performances, and the great investment of labor, time, and energy put into them, make these enactments arenas for political consolidation and negotiation, as well as subversion. Clifford Geertz (1980), for example, notes that the poetics and aesthetics of funerary spectacles were indispensable for constructing institutionalized power in nineteenth-century Balinese Negara. The tangible images of the ruler's body and state buildings and the collective acts of their public display were critical to what many individuals consciously recognized as the established social order. The dramatic displays of state symbols not only constituted a political strategy of governance, but were the state in their own right: "theatre-states" (Geertz 1980, 93). In this sense, the state was (re)created insofar as death was celebrated under public scrutiny as the corpse of the ruler personified statehood.

But the power of death and its deep influence on politics and governance have clear correlates even in our day. The large and spectacular funerary processions that preceded the burial, for example, of the US former president John F. Kennedy, the Argentinian first lady Eva Peron, and Pope John Paul II are eloquent displays of the potent symbolism of the dead body, as well as the real power that is inscribed in it while seen by, and moved through, thousand if not millions of spectators. The funerals of these important individuals produced profound impacts on the societies to which they belonged, and time and space were particularly reconfigured while their deaths were "performed." The deaths of these charismatic leaders shocked people at first, but then people collectively participated in their funerals, while witnessing an exuberant display of state paraphernalia and religious emblems that visually reinforced political discourses of domination and hierarchical power structures. Walking through their tombs, visiting their memorial monuments, whether collectively or individually, and living through their predicaments are clear signs of how death, power, and politics are particularly intertwined with each other.

This has important parallels in both the past and present. In fact, Foucault (1977) argued that, in premodern times, power was exercised through spectacle, and that institutionalized discipline in particular was manifested through "was what was seen, what was shown, and what was manifested" (quoted in Inomata and Coben 2006, 26). Namely, power was body-centered and exercised through control of the body's freedom and of its emotions and perceptions. The conversion of ancient political and religious leaders into gods or goddesses through complex rituals of deification had potent effects on the viewers and the ways they perceived political and social reality. As happened in ancient Rome and Angkor, the "god-king after corporeal demise went on to a condition of immortality" (Renfrew 2016, 9), and this immortality and divinity of the sovereign constituted the basis of the political articulation and legitimacy of the system as a whole. From the deceased buried beneath the house floors of Çatalhöyük to the Incan mummies paraded through the Coricancha plaza, it was the power of what was seen and shown through such spaces that sedimented, in the witnesses' minds, a perception, as well as justification, of a given political and social order. And this happens even in our times.

Now, death continues to be intimately linked to politics and power along with inequality and inequity. While death is a universal phenomenon, it is not experienced in the same way by groups across the globe. As this exhibit also shows, economic, social, racial, and ethnic differences also determine the ways in which people suffer, and display their suffering, when facing death. In Latin America, my own home region, experiences around death are tragically disproportionate. While some bury their deceased with great pomp, others, from historically marginalized groups, cannot even find the bodies of their loved ones, because they were victims of armed conflict, forced migrations, institutionalized violence, or gender-based crimes, among other causes. Whereas in developed nations, to not bury your loved one with the deserved love and affection might often seem unthinkable, in developing nations some people have been deprived of their right to know what has happened to their missing relatives.



Figure 4.14. Ghanaian wood coffin of a canoe with rowers by Seth Kane Kwei, ca. 1981 (FM 361842.1-.12).



Figure 4.15. Ancestral shrine at Bungule, Kasigau, Taita-Taveta County, Kenya.

4D Tsavo Shrines

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Throughout our history, humankind has developed myriad ways to remember the dead, from leaving them in their homes to burying them at sea. Many of these ways leave no trace, so we may never fully appreciate how some communities memorialized the dead. We can, however, understand the pain they endured and continue to endure when we lose loved ones. Still, there remains a considerable bias in how the dead were remembered. Today's archaeological record mostly recounts the narratives of the elite, whose relatives could afford to inter the remains of their loved ones. For the most part, the remains of commoners were often discarded in the wilderness. However, archaeologists utilize the few memorials available to determine how each society viewed and dealt with death.

A Field Museum anthropological archaeology expedition in the Tsavo National Park in southeast Kenya recovered several hundred graves, cemeteries, cairns, and skull interment sites (Kusimba and Kusimba 2000). These memorial sites belonged to ancestors of Kenyan people who inhabited the Tsavo plains until they were designated a national park in 1948. These memorial sites provided the most substantial evidence of identities, mortuary behavior, and the people's belief systems during the precolonial period before many converted to Christianity and Islam. The cairns housed the remains of the pastoral Oromo; the graves were variously attributed to the agropastoral Wambisha and Wataita, who inhabited the Tsavo plains before warfare instigated by drought, disease, and the slave trade forced them to migrate to the Taita, Saghala, and Kasigau Hills. These migrants were to eke out a living on the congested hill for the next four centuries, after which peaceful coexistence was reestablished following the abolition of the slave trade and the advent of European colonial rule in the late nineteenth century. How did the people of southeast Kenya maintain relationships with the ancestral shrines which they abruptly abandoned in the Tsavo plains? How and in what ways did their new refuge residences influence their mortuary behavior and practices?

The Field Museum expedition recovered evidence indicating that as they moved to new, more congested hills, these refugees radically changed how they memorialized their ancestors. Slavery, famine, disease, and other crises had forced them to adopt a nomadic lifestyle which involved them regularly moving with little warning. Many adopted a mortuary behavior pattern of migrating with their ancestors. Beginning from the sixteenth century, instead of burying the dead in graves, they began to disinter their ancestors' skulls and built shrines for

them wherever they settled. To maintain strong bonds between ancestors and their descendants, the ancestors were regularly propitiated with gifts of food and drink. They reciprocated by protecting their descendants from calamities and crises like drought, diseases, sterility, and witchcraft. Large partially broken pots and gourds found at interment sites were used in the ceremonial feasting that occurred at these sites.

Our team recovered four such shrine sites in the Tsavo region. One was located in a deep ravine in Sungululu village near Wundanyi town. This one contained 26 skulls, including one of a sheep. The second was found in Kajire, a rocky promontory above the central zone of habitation on Saghala Hills, which included more than 300 cranial remains arranged in different areas of a composite of rocky outcrops. The third was found in Bungule in the Kasigau Hills (Figure 4.15). The Bungule shrine bore 45 individuals. The fourth was the shrine in Makwasinyi, Kasigau Hills, which contained 25 individual skulls.

Elders from the Sungululu community related that the skull of sheep stood in for an ancestor who was lost to the community in a slaving raid. His body was never interred with the ancestors and his mortal remains never returned to his community after his disappearance. Yet he is remembered by those he left behind, and the skull of an animal fulfills his place in the relocated shrine in the Tsavo Hills. Sometimes, an individual's removal from his community marks his social death, as his physical death and mortal remains are never seen by those family members who were ripped from his existence.

Informants confirmed that the groups of cranial remains represented their patrilineage of ancestors. Individuals would be buried in graves for two years, following which the deceased's skull would be disinterred and placed in a cranial display niche. Only married individuals with children were disinterred. Although the practice of disinterring ancestral skulls declined in the 1920s following conversion to Christianity and the colonial decree which discouraged the practice, informants argued that the skulls' rituals continued into the 1950s. The shrines of Tsavo remind us that physical death does not mean an end to familial relationship. Shrines ensure continuity and permanence between the dead, the living, and the unborn.

Reference

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