

# Dying peacefully: considering good death and bad death in Kwahu-Tafo, Ghana

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## Abstract

People in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town in Southern Ghana, regard a peaceful death as a ‘good death’. ‘Peaceful’ refers to the dying person having finished all business and made peace with others before his/her death and implies being at peace with his/her own death. It further refers to the manner of dying: not by violence, an accident or a fearsome disease, not by foul means and without much pain. A good and peaceful death comes ‘naturally’ after a long and well-spent life. Such a death preferably takes place at home, which is the epitome of peacefulness, surrounded by children and grandchildren. Finally, a good death is a death which is accepted by the relatives. This ‘definition’ of good death—‘bad death’ is its opposite—does not imply, however, that it is a fixed category. The quality of one’s death is liable to social and political manoeuvre and, therefore, inherently ambiguous. The good death of a very old and successful person can be decried by the younger generation as the death of a witch who managed to live long at the expense of young people who died prematurely. The article is based on anthropological fieldwork carried out intermittently from 1971 to the present day.

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## The death of Afua Dunkwa<sup>1</sup>

On the 13th of June 1971 Afua Dunkwa, a woman in the rural town of Kwahu-Tafo, suddenly died in a nearby hospital. She was about 40 years old and had seven children. It happened during my first fieldwork in the town. I was then staying in the house of an old man by the name of Kwaku Omari, who was Dunkwa’s (classificatory) brother and head of the family (*abusua panyin*) to which Dunkwa had belonged.

In the evening of that day I was having my meal in my room, together with my friend and research assistant Kwasi Asante-Darko. Suddenly we heard some noise,

people speaking at the pitch of their voice. An argument took place in the compound of the house and more people entered and joined the debate. We soon found out what the commotion was about. Mr. Frempong, Afua Dunkwa’s husband, had come to inform our landlord about the death of his ‘sister’. This was a customary thing to do. The *abusua panyin* is responsible for the funeral of all members of his family.<sup>2</sup> The husband’s visit was the first step required for a fitting funeral. But things went very differently.

What we did not know was that the husband had a conflict over a piece of land with Kwaku Omari about a year ago. The conflict had developed into an exchange of abuses and threats and some light blows and finally into a court case. In the aftermath of this quarrel Afua Dunkwa had chosen her husband’s side against her

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<sup>1</sup> Contrary to my previous practice, I have used people’s real names throughout this article. Most of the elderly people figuring in my study indicated that they wanted to be mentioned (and remembered) by their true name. I assume that those who did not express themselves explicitly on this point and who are now dead held the same view.

<sup>2</sup> Fortes (1969, p. 187) writes: “When a member of the lineage dies... it is the lineage head’s duty to take charge of the mortuary arrangements and observances and to preside over the eighth day, fortieth day, and anniversary obsequies.

‘brother’ and *abusua panyin*, which, according to the ‘tradition’ was a wrong thing to do. The marital relationship is only a temporary friendship, an—often short—contract; where as the bond with the family (*abusua*) is forever. Communication between Omari and his sister and brother-in-law stopped completely. Most other members of the *abusua* tried to keep away from the affair and pretended not to know about it.

When on that evening the husband came to inform Omari about his wife’s sudden death, the case flared up again. Omari renounced his sister and said he would have nothing to do with her funeral. Frempong and Dunkwa, he said, had treated him as a stranger. “If Frempong and Dunkwa did not know me, I also do not know her now that she is dead. Frempong can send the body anywhere he likes. I will not have any hand to play in her funeral. I have finished.”

Several elders and a lot of on lookers had assembled in the courtyard. The elders started to give their views and advised Frempong to render apologies. When he finally did, Omari refused to accept them and repeated that he should take the body elsewhere to bury.

A drama had started not very different from the classic story of Antigone who was not allowed to bury her brother Polyneikos. Only the next day, when more respected elders came to plea for a reconciliation and after Frempong, in the company of his daughter had been thoroughly humiliated and had offered his apologies, Kwaku Omari gave in and allowed the funeral to take place.

The next day pots of palm wine began to arrive from everywhere. Young men, elderly men, women and girls started drinking. Finally, at about 10.45 a.m. the horn of a lorry was heard blowing loudly. People were running helter-skelter, shouting, “They have brought her.” (*Yède n’aba oo, Yède n’aba oo!*). People strained their necks to see the corpse inside the lorry. The coffin was on top. Weeping and mourning started again vehemently. The corpse was wrapped in a blanket and two mats and taken into the house. The eldest daughter of the deceased went through the street, mourning, followed by many girls of her age. By 12.00 O’clock the body had been dressed up and laid on a bed, decorated with kente cloth.<sup>3</sup>

By 2.00 p.m. we saw a girl in the middle of a big crowd. She was shaking and we were told that she was possessed by the ghost of the deceased. One man tried to drive the people away from her, but he had no success. A group of young women managed to bring Dunkwa’s daughter to the possessed girl and the two entered Omari’s house with the entire crowd following them.

The possessed girl made some unintelligible sounds and gestures, and another lady, her sister, interpreted them into words. She said that the Dunkwa’s ghost wanted her eldest children to be one and take proper care of the other children. She also gave instructions about who should inherit her and revealed a few things about money hidden in the house. One lady, highly provoked, abused the people of Kwahu-Tafo for not believing that the girl was really possessed and saying that she was only drunk.

While this was going on, a group of market women brought foodstuffs, meat and fish in big baskets on their heads to the house where the body was lying in state. They started to act as if they were trading at the market in front of the corpse to pay tribute to the deceased who had been a trader herself. They paraded the street simultaneously mourning and trading in a mock-fashion with their big baskets. They defied the rain which was then starting to fall.

Close relatives had their hair shaved off in a nearby house. Between 3.00 and 6.00 p.m. mourning was at its zenith. Young women went up and down weeping. Lorries could hardly pass through the town because of the crowd. Men as well as women stood in front of the corpse and expressed their sorrows in frenzied manners. One woman fell heavily over a gutter, but she hardly noticed it. Both young and old were drinking profusely. The occasion demanded it.

Around 5.30 p.m. the body was put in the coffin. One woman brought a piece of cloth and said, “Afua, the children of the chief say, this is their cloth and the amount of one shilling and sixpence which are gifts for your journey.” (*Afua, Ahenemma se, wcn ntoma ne wcn sika, siren ne taku a wede regya wo kwan ni*). One man took the money and the cloth, repeated the same words and put them in the coffin.

A young man entered with a group of girls, who formed a kind of singing band. They sang some Presbyterian funeral songs while another one began to cry loudly, “Oh, my mother, my mother.” (*Me na ee, me na ee*). A group of young men, led by a driver, shouted “Where are the drinks?” The driver picked up a stone and got ready to nail the coffin. One relative, in a red cloth, stood over the coffin and spoke loudly to the deceased. His words expressed anger that the woman was dead. He said,

You fell ill only a short while ago and now you say you are dead. Why is it that a human being should die? It was only your stomach that pained you a short while ago and now you say you are dead. When you go, let us all see who killed you. Let us see him tomorrow, so that everybody will know him. When a human being dies, that is the end, but how should such a person die without reason, without anyone knowing about it?

<sup>3</sup>Kente is expensive hand-woven cloth, worn at festive occasions.

The driver closed the coffin amid mourning and wailing. The carriers took the coffin to carry it to the cemetery. Young men and women went ahead or followed. The elderly men and women waited at home for their return. The coffin stopped five times on the road and on one occasion it started to run. A teacher tried in vain to convince the bearers to ‘behave properly’. Some girls—quite drunk already—entered the wrong cemetery. The graveside was a testing ground for strength. Before the coffin reached the side, one young man tried to jump into the grave. He was crying loudly. People tried in vain to stop him. Just at the time the coffin arrived he jumped into the grave. Another man also jumped in and tried to push the first one out. This started a quarrel and some blows were exchanged. A third man joined the two and managed to push the first man out. The two others remained in the grave and helped to lower the coffin into it. There was no formality. People began to cover the grave with flowers, leaves and soil.

The teacher asked the relatives why they would not allow him to say a short prayer. They allowed him and after his prayer they continued covering the grave. One young man burst out: “As you go, help your daughter, that, if she trades, she will get much money to look after your children.” After finishing people started to leave the place in groups. The workers drank the remaining gin and went home. The sun had set.

At about 7.30 p.m. we went to the main canteen of the town. Elders and young boys and girls, teachers and school children had mixed, dancing to the music. One Highlife record was played all the time, “Maame Adwoa”, about a woman who had died at a young age and left her children and husband in despair. The song seemed to have been made for the occasion. The fact that the husband in the song was called Frempong made the text uncannily real.

Afua Dunkwa’s death was untimely and in that sense a ‘bad death’. She was only 40 and left behind seven children, most of whom were too young to care for themselves. Moreover, she lived in conflict with her *abusua panyin* at the moment of her death and did not get the chance to reconcile with him before she died. She almost suffered the ultimate disgrace of not receiving a fitting funeral. Finally her death was so sudden and unexpected that it was widely believed that someone, probably a witch (*bayifoc*) had killed her.<sup>4</sup> The tragic circumstances around her death fuelled the emotions rendering her funeral one of the most dramatic ones people in Kwahu-Tafo remembered.

### Fieldwork, Kwahu-Tafo and Akan Society

My first fieldwork in Kwahu-Tafo took place in 1971. It was an anthropological study of daily life in an arbitrary family (*abusua*) of about 75 living adults and adolescents. My focus was on tensions and conflicts, suspicious as I was about the harmonious picture anthropologists had been painting of the African kinship system. Dunkwa’s premature death and its tumultuous aftermath formed the starting point of an analysis of three major tensions in the *abusua*: between marriage and family membership, around death and with regard to witchcraft beliefs (Bleek, 1975).

A second fieldwork on fertility beliefs and practices took place in 1973 but falls outside the theme of this article. In 1994 I returned again to the place to start research on social and cultural meanings of growing old. Short visits of one or several months have continued to the present day. My study of old age led me almost immediately to ideas and experiences of death. The elderly were often thinking about their death and by now most of them have actually died.

The research among the elderly consisted mainly of conversations with them and with relatives who happened to be around. With some of them I had many conversations, with others only one or two. The total number of elderly I spoke with was 35. Each conversation had a theme, which had more or less been determined by the outcome of a previous meeting. These themes included the concept of ‘old’, respect, care, wisdom, the power of elderly people (blessing and cursing), the role of money in their lives, the importance of building a house, sexuality, and their approaching death and funeral.<sup>5</sup> The last two topics form the basis of this essay.

Apart from conversations, the research also involved more formal techniques such as questionnaires in schools and focus group discussions with young and middle-aged people. Finally, taking part in daily activities of elderly people and observation constituted another important part of the study.

Kwahu-Tafo is a rural town of about 6000 inhabitants. Most of them are Kwahu, a subgroup of the about eight million Akan who live in the south of the country. Kwahu-Tafo is a town like many other ones. Most of its inhabitants are farmers—at least part-time—and traders. Now, in 2002, there is electricity and pipe-borne water but many households have no or very limited access to these facilities. The town lies at the cross-point of five routes and a lot of traffic is passing through it, in spite of the poor quality of the roads. There are several schools and Christian churches and a clinic, which is run

<sup>4</sup>The rumours and witchcraft accusations around her death are the theme of another publication (Bleek, 1976).

<sup>5</sup>These themes have been discussed in various articles (e.g. Van der Geest, 1995, 1997, 1998a, b, 2000, 2002a, b).

by foreign missionaries. The town has a *zongo*, a quarter for Northerners and foreigners, with a mosque.

Kwahu people are well known for their trading skills and can be found in urban centres through the whole country. Most of the elderly people I met had in fact been trading during their most active years and had returned around the age of fifty to resume farming in their hometown. Farming, one could say, was the occupation of their ‘third age’.

The Akan, to which the Kwahu people belong, are matrilineal.<sup>6</sup> The marriage bond is generally less important than lineage membership, as was also illustrated by the events around Afua Dunkwa’s death. A person’s first loyalty lies, or should lie, with the *abusua*. The *abusua*, Fortes (1969, p. 187) writes, ‘owns’ its members and looks somewhat askance at a ‘successful’ marriage as it threatens the solidarity within its ranks. Divorce is common and interference by relatives is one of the most frequent reasons for the break-up of marriages.

Saying—as I just did—that the Akan are matrilineal is too schematic, however. Akan society is going through a period of profound changes. People’s outlook on various aspects of life, including marriage and kinship, has become highly ambivalent. On moments of decision-taking and during crises people may act in ‘contradictory’ ways. Depending on their interests in the matter they may argue for a ‘traditional’ (matrilineal) option or choose a ‘modern’ solution which favours the rights of the conjugal family.

### Death in Kwahu society

In the industrial world of Europe and North America death is being ‘gerontologised’. The death of a young person has become increasingly exceptional and most of the elderly who die, do so at a late age. Death is distant and distanced (cf. Komaromy & Hockey, 2001). Kwahu shows a different picture: death is always around and takes its toll at all ages. With the gradual arrival of AIDS (cf. Radstake, 2000) it will probably continue to do so. People have their ways of dealing with it. There may be violent crying, loud music and drunkenness at the funeral and then it seems over. Death is part of life.

A lot has been written about the medicalisation of death in ‘the West’. Medical technology pushes the moment of death ever further away. When old people

finally die, it is likely to occur in the company of more machinery than people. Rubinstein (1995), who collected the narratives of middle-aged American women about the death of one of their parents, describes how these stories are enmeshed with medical reports. The medical interventions are not only a part of the story of death, they constitute the ‘hinges’ of the narrative.

The opposite is true for death in Kwahu-Tafo. Of course, there is an account of the worsening condition of the person, but it is rare that a long series of medical interventions play a role in the report which people give about the last days or weeks of their relative. The quotation below about the last moments of one of the elderly people given by his daughter is a good example of such a non-medical narrative.

After Christmas [1995] he was not able to get out of bed anymore. He had to be helped to go to toilet, to bath and to do everything. He became very weak but was able to talk and could also take his meals. About a month before he died, he became so weak that it was impossible for him to do anything and we realized that he was in great bodily pains especially when we attempted to lift him up. On the morning of the day he died, after bathing, I offered him some food but he refused to take it. I asked him if I should give him water instead and he agreed. After offering him the water, I left the room to do some household chores. A few moments later, my brother came to pay him a visit and as soon as he entered the room, he called me and told me that the old man had gone. I couldn’t believe him because a few minutes before I had heard a boy who changed an electric bulb in the room greeting him and asking about his health which he was able to answer. I answered my brother that he might be asleep, but when I examined him I found it to be true. He was dead.

The old man’s death was peaceful and no medical battle was fought to keep him alive. The most significant element in the daughter’s account is that she was able to give her father some water to drink before he died, a crucial customary gesture, which is mentioned almost surreptitiously, but mentioned nevertheless.

Death in Kwahu society is a private affair. Funerals are public events but sickbed and death occur in the seclusion of the house. Death remains ‘confidential’ until it is—literally—announced and preparations can start for the funeral. Death, indeed, is eclipsed by the funeral, in many ways. People may not know about someone’s poor physical condition and sickness until it is all over. Even relatives may take relatively little interest in the sickness of a person. Medical care is expensive and the outcome is uncertain, so the willingness to spend money on a sick person who is going to die anyway is limited (see Van der Geest, 2000; Arhinful, 2000). Money spent

<sup>6</sup>Other Akan groups include the Asante, Fante, Akyem, Akuapem, Bono and several other smaller groups. Some of the important studies of Akan culture are those by Rattray (1923, 1927, 1929), Danquah (1928), Busia (1951), Field (1960), Fortes (1969), Warren (1974), Arhin (1979), and Oppong (1982). Studies dealing with Kwahu society include Bleek (1975), Bartle (1977) and Miescher (1997).

on a funeral, however, is much more certain to be effective and bear fruit. That difference in readiness to pay is further promoted by the private/public distinction. Social critique is more likely to be raised about a badly organised funeral, which everybody can witness than about a poorly cared for patient who is hidden in the house.

### The death of Kwame Frempong

When in 1994 I returned to Kwahu for my research among the elderly, I met *panyin* Kwame Frempong, Afua Dunkwa's husband, who had suffered so much humiliation 23 years ago at the death of his wife. He was now an old and well-respected man. He was staying in a new house, which one of his sons had built for him. Although his eyesight was poor, he was still reading books, in particular the Bible and loved to discuss with visitors what he had read, or had heard on the radio. He had been one of the first children of the town to go to school. He had been a cocoa-buyer and an active member of several political and religious organisations. In 1953 he had travelled to a famous shrine in Guinée-Conakry to seek help to become successful in life. The journey had led him through Mali and some other countries. Having 'seen' other places had increased his wisdom as an elder (*panyin*).<sup>7</sup> His son told me that his father had been the first person to bring a motorcycle to Kwahu-Taho another sign of his successful life. After three marriages, Kwame Frempong had fifteen children, 63 grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren. He died at the age of 90 on the 24th February 1996 and was buried 1 month later, on the 23rd March. I was not in Ghana. I heard about his death and funeral through a letter from one of my friends:

I wish to inform you with deep sorrow about the death of our philosophic friend *panyin* Kwame Frempong. *panyin* Frempong had what I will term a grand but modest funeral. The wake keeping was held in a Christian manner. There was a band playing gospel music throughout the night and members from the various Church denominations were there also singing nicely.

He was laid in state in their family house. The children and relatives did everything accordingly in a very modest manner but still with a touch of elegance befitting a humble man as our friend was. As usual the house was painted nicely for the occasion and he

was laid in state in one of the rooms in the house but not on the veranda as is usually done around here. He was dressed in a simple but very nice grey suit. There was no change whatsoever in him. The coffin was in the same category as everything at the funeral: very nice but I don't think the cost was too much.

Because *panyin* Frempong hailed from Peki in the Volta Region, there was a delegation from that place and they came along with a cultural dance and drumming troupe known as 'borboobor'. They also were around, doing their own thing during the wake keeping and funeral, which was held the next day. In all everything on the funeral was nicely done and a lot of people commended the children for honouring their father after his death.

The letter contained a printed programme of the burial service, with a picture of the deceased, two pages with his life history and tributes by the Presbyterian Church and his children. The next quotation, which describes him as a successful and good person, emphasises the importance of his role in providing education to his children and other relatives. Educating one's children is the key element of a successful life. Dying after this accomplishment implies a good death.

Papa, as we affectively called him,...was compelled to educate his relatives—brothers, sisters, nephews and nieces...He at the same time provided education for his [own] children. And not one of us was left out...Papa, you have lived a full life worthy of emulation and many were the fruits of your labour. Ninety years on this planet is no mean achievement. We salute and applaud you for not only have you conquered in the battle of life but above all you have fought well.

As stated in the letter, Kwame Frempong had a philosophical mind. One day he told my co-researcher Patrick Atuobi that a man was made to come to this world to make it better than he came to meet it. It summarised the purpose of his own active life. In 1995, one year before his death Patrick (P) paid a visit to him (F) and asked him about his view of death. The opening question was quite direct: "You are now an old man. Are you troubled by the thought of death?" He answered:

F. Never. At this age you don't fear death, you rather look forward to it. I remember some time ago... ✘ What we are always afraid of is to lie in bed for a long time while people have to help you with a lot of things. When Master Mensah [one of his friends] was alive, his motto was *Na anka hwerèw* (I wish it would happen in a flash), which at his age meant that he was looking forward to a quick death. He was lucky and

<sup>7</sup> *panyin* (pl. *mpanyimfo*) is an honorific term used for people beyond the age of about 50. More than an indication of age, it carries a positive appreciation of the person: his/her wisdom, kindness, civilised manners and political importance. See further Stucki (1995), Apt (1996) and Van der Geest (1998b).

almost had it so. So you see, an aged person is never afraid or worried about death.

When you grow old, death does not disturb you because you realise that by all means you will die one day. So I am not afraid of death at all. But what you mostly think of is the manner in which you may die. Whether it will be a proper way or a bad way. On death let us have this example. In the forest we sometimes find an old tree that is dead without a visible sign that something happened to it. If you have a close look at it, you discover that it was not burnt. It just died because the end of its life had come. It is the same with a man; no matter what happens, you are bound to die one day. So as you grow old, you look forward to death without any fear.

P. You just spoke of good death and bad death. Can you tell me the difference?

F. Good death is when a person grows old and dies peacefully. Bad death is when a person dies at a tender age because of his wrongdoings. We say: *wabu abugyen* (he has been forced to break suddenly). It was not time for the person to die but due to something he died.

P. Can a person die when the time for his death is not due?

F. A person is bound to die but some die early as a result of the kind of life they lead.

P. *cpanyin*, I don't understand how a person can die naturally while we claim that his time for death had not come.

F. If you die because of the wrongs you committed against others it is not a proper death and it occurred not because your time was due. Another example is when a person kills himself.

### Good and bad death

Coincidence made me a witness of the deaths of two people, 25 years apart, who had once been a married couple. Their deaths, however, were strikingly different. Afua Dunkwa died prematurely, still in conflict with her brother and lineage head, and under suspicious circumstances. She was not prepared for it and left behind a family in disarray. *Maame Adwoa*, the highlife song, which became a hit at her funeral, was right: "Your house will be filled with dirt and your children will be miserable... To whom did you leave your husband Frempong? There is no woman so kind to marry him...". The 'noise' of her funeral expressed this concern about the incompleteness of her life but it also

attempted to overcome her 'bad death', even to conceal it, by repeatedly stressing the value of her life and the goodness of her character.

Frempong's death, on the other hand, was peaceful and timely. It was the natural end of full and valuable life. There was no reason to shout or protest at his death. Gratefulness and admiration for his past life dominated at his funeral, which was orderly and 'modest' as my friend wrote. Like all the other elders with whom I had discussed death, *Cpanyin* Frempong had welcomed his death. It was a typical example of a 'good death'.

Let us now look more closely at these two concepts 'good death' (*owupa*) and 'bad death' (*owubcne*) in Kwahu society. 'Bad death' in its widest sense is a death which comes too early, which terminates the life of someone who has not yet completed his course, who has not yet come to full maturity. Miescher (1997, p. 529) writes that bad or accidental death (*ctefo wu*) includes deaths caused by accidents or suicides, by certain illnesses, or during childbirth (see also Sarpong, 1974, p. 35; Baaré, 1986, pp. 55–56). Bartle, who did research in another Kwahu town, Obo, writes:

Traditional practices deny formal funerals for the following deaths: *kwata* (leprosy), *owa* (tuberculosis), *ahoho* (swelling preceding death), *otwa* (fits or convulsions), *ctefo* (suicides, state executions, witches killed by medicine or *bosom*), *kokraw* (sores, nose falls off, syphilis... Accidents such as lorry accidents, murder aeroplane, train [accidents], snakebite, falling out of a tree, etc. are still strictly called *ctefo*, but the deceased are not denied a funeral nowadays, yet the funeral would be smaller than otherwise given his status (Bartle, 1977, p. 393).

The most shameful of all deaths, Bartle notes, is suicide and the worst form of 'suicide' (plus infanticide) is (was) death during childbirth.

If the woman dies during childbirth she is despised, her death is seen as a cowardly act worse than suicide, for she kills the child while she should be doing her most honourable duty of bringing forth. Like other *ctefo* (bad death) corpses, hers was thrown in the bush where other pregnant women come to hurl abuse, spit, and epithets while pointing plantain leaves at her (Bartle, 1977, p. 378).

Nowadays, Bartle added, "the corpse is put in a box and buried with minimal ceremony, while the shameful nature of her death is hidden or softened by euphemistic circumlocution."

Stucki (1995, p. 141), quoting Warren, writes that the Asante (the largest Akan group) identified four types of death: (1) *abodwewu*, natural death from old age or sickness (except leprosy, etc.). It should be noted,

however, that these days people with leprosy and other detested diseases *are* given a fitting burial; (2) *nsramwu*, honourable death by violence such as in a war. In Kwahu-Tafo the death of woman who was killed by a falling tree during communal labour was also considered *nsramwu*; (3) *anwobabu*, dishonourable death of a childless man or woman, or death by suicide, leprosy, drowning, electrocution, etc; and (4) *amumuwu*, death of a woman in pregnancy, birth or abortion. All these tragic deaths were believed to be punishments for sins. Nowadays, people show more sympathy for a woman who dies during pregnancy. If no evil intention is suspected (for example attempted abortion), she will get a proper funeral.

When libations are poured to remember the dead, as is commonly done, both in formal ceremonies and during more casual meetings, those who died tragically are usually not mentioned by name. To be mentioned or not be mentioned during libation is indeed one of the most 'objective' indications of good and bad death.

Frempong referred to 'bad death' as death at 'tender age'; life which was forced to break suddenly (*wabu abugyen*). The 'badness' of premature death is particularly felt if the deceased himself carries responsibility for his early death. Another elder, *Ckyeame*<sup>8</sup> Opoku remarked: "Bad death is when a person poisons himself, hangs himself or shoots himself with a gun."

Ironically, a 'bad death' may also produce a 'good funeral', as we saw in the case of Afua Dunkwa. Once I attended an impressive funeral for a young woman who had died after an attempted abortion, which is regarded as the most shameful and senseless death imaginable. Her body would have been thrown away if the relatives had followed the customs, but the opposite happened. Her funeral was an emotional farewell and no one openly mentioned the cause of her death. The shame of her death was, as it were, collectively denied in the public defiance demonstrated during the funeral.

In her study of funeral celebrations in Asante, Marleen de Witte describes the dramatic funeral (*soroku*) of a young man who had died at the age of 28. The scene was a pandemonium of vehement crying, shouting, tooting horns, men in women's dress and fighting around the grave. One woman was waving condoms indicating the incompleteness of the young man's life.

One boy was holding a plastic container as if it was a video camera and 'recorded' the scene. Many people

were drunk. The bar next door, the "Star Nite Club", was totally integrated in the over-all scene of chaos, hysteria and drunkenness. Several times small fights broke out. A drunken boy evoked trouble when he picked up an amplifier of the guitar band, put it on his head and started dancing with it. When the empty coffin was brought in, the lid broke when people tried to grab it (De Witte, 2001, pp. 92–93).

Bartle (1977, p. 392) quotes a proverb that one should not rush to attend the funeral of someone who has 'stumbled to his death' (*Nea wahintiw awu no, wontutu nkc n'ayi ase*). This maxim seems to serve the ideology more than the actual practice. Here I do not agree with Bartle who remarks: "the more shameful the circumstances of death, the less elaborated and ostentatious are the funeral rites" (1977, p. 392). The 'stumbling to death', accidental death (*ctcfo wu*) may be shameful, but that does not prevent people from rushing to it. Rather, the large attendance and emotional 'success' of such funerals seem ways to remove the death's shameful character. Such funerals are simply 'hijacked' by the wailing crowd.

It is also 'bad death' and its dramatic character which is sung about in countless Highlife lyrics.<sup>9</sup> Good death does not inspire the Highlife singer. The sudden unjust death, the young twig broken before it could become a tree and bear fruit, figures prominently in the songs that are endlessly played to stir up the emotions during funerals.<sup>10</sup> Let us look at one example, a song which tells three stories of bad death and comments on them, *Òbrè biara twa owuo* ('All hard work ends in death') by the African Brothers Band:

All hard work ends up in death.

Every man toils for his death.

People do not understand the death of others,  
but all hard work and tiredness have to end up in death.

Mr. Dominic Owusu Ansa, also called Osei Yaw, died a death which pained everybody, his family and his friends.

Osei Yaw travelled from Accra to Kumasi for business.

He was accompanied by his eldest wife, Esther Boatemaa.

On his return to Accra Osei Yaw met one of his best friends.

He asked his wife to take the lead to Accra,  
as he wanted to join his friend in his car.

<sup>8</sup> *Ckyeame* (often translated as 'linguist') is an official at the chief's court. Yankah (1995, p. 3) describes the function of the *Òkyeame* as 'speaking for the chief': "Being a counsellor and intermediary to the chief, he is responsible, among other things, for enhancing the rhetoric of the words the chief has spoken. In the absence of an *kyeame*'s editorial art, the royal speech act is considered functionally and artistically incomplete".

<sup>9</sup> Highlife is popular music, a blend of traditional rhythms and melodies with European musical elements. It encompasses a variety of artistic expressions: instrumental music, songs, dancing and theatre.

<sup>10</sup> On Highlife songs and death, see Van der Geest (1980, 1984), Yankah, (1984), Brempong, (1986, pp. 389–440).

Some friendships are stronger than the bonds with brothers and sisters.

Because of her love for her husband Esther accepts anything from him.

Auntie Esther has reached Accra and prepares some food for Yaw.

Yaw does not come, and Esther becomes nervous and starts to pray.

She sits waiting for her husband in the sitting room.

It is past bed time.

Suddenly someone knocks on the door and tells her to start crying

because her husband Yaw has not been able to arrive in Accra.

He has had an accident on the road and is dead.

Eeei, Esther, alas!

Your two children loved their father very much.

Nana Yaw Kyere and his sister,

Maame Boatemaa, what must they do!

Aaaah, they will hear this painful news in their early childhood.

Eeeei, every hard work will end up in death.

Yaw Osei, accept my condolences.

Nana Yaa Amponsaa also condoles with you.

Aaah, all hard work ends up in death.

Death can bring someone's prestige to an end.

When a person is about to become 'somebody' in life,

death takes that person away.

Yaw George had finished his school and was asked by his parents

to pursue his education overseas.

He set a date for his return from abroad.

The time for his return had not yet arrived when news came from abroad that he had died.

Everybody was asking what had caused his death.

Aaah, all hard work ends up in death.

Aaah, all hard work ends up in death.

Yaw Tano, a priest, bought new land.

He has grown cocoa on the land for five years.

This year is supposed to bring the first harvest.

But death does not allow man to pluck the fruits of his labour.

Farmer Yaw Boateng goes to his farm

but does not return at dusk.

Men go out to search for him, to see what has happened to him.

When the people reach his farm, the farmer is already dead.

What killed this man, everyone is asking.

Whether he was bitten by a snake,

or struck by a sudden disease,

how are we going to find out?

Bad death helps to bring the concept of 'good death' (*owu pa*) into focus: the death which *is* necessary because time is up and the person has lived his life to the end. Frempong put it beautifully in the metaphor of the dead trunk of a tree in the forest. That tree did not die of any disease or fire but reached its end in a natural way. Opoku: "Good death is when a person dies a natural death, after having put his things in order. At the funeral of someone who died a good death people wear white funeral cloths." One elder: "He has children, so we have to put on a white cloth. If you put on a black cloth, it means that you are mourning too much. When we put on white cloth, the old man realises that we respect him."

I have rarely seen a funeral with many people in white cloths, but a well attended and worthy funeral certainly is indispensable for the recognition of 'good death'. A good funeral (not necessarily a highly emotional one) is an inalienable part of good death. This is the reason that elderly people are concerned about their funeral (Van der Geest, 1995). Several of them complained about the poor state of their house as it would not be suitable to host their funeral and would cast a slur on their reputation. In the same vein, infertility is seen as a funeral problem. In a famous, now classic Highlife song a childless woman, Yaa Boahemaa, mourns about herself because "when she dies, there will be nobody to mourn for her."

A good death and a fitting funeral are linked to a good life. They end what has been good, and which has reached its completion. They are part of what nowadays is called 'successful ageing'. The goodness of a life is reflected in the appreciation of the death, which ends it. People would not call a death 'good' if it ends a life that has been a failure.

### Christianity's contribution

The firm establishment of Christianity in Kwahu society has made its impact on the experience of good and bad death. The Christian presence varies from the old missionary churches such as the Roman Catholic, the Presbyterian ('Basel') and the Methodist Church, to more recent ones such as the Seventh Day Adventists and the Assemblies of God, and the new indigenous churches with a strong Pentecostal tint. One can safely say that, apart from the family (*abusua*), churches are now the main bodies of social belonging. The most conspicuous social and cultural events are often church-related: festivities, social gatherings, communal labour, musical and other artistic performances, charity, and—most of all—funerals.

For Christians who are regular churchgoers and pay their monthly or annual dues, death has brought a few extra considerations to bear. For them, a good death is a



death which is preceded by certain religious rituals and activities provided by their church. It also implies that the dying person has completed his/her obligations to the church.

As I explained in another article (Van der Geest 2002b), the Christian doctrine has changed little in people's outlook on death. Local concepts of death may assume Christian terms without changing much of their original meaning. Ideas about ancestors and reincarnation, for example, are rarely supplanted by Christian teachings.<sup>11</sup> In this connection I am reminded of what Jon Kirby, anthropologist and Catholic priest told me about an old lady he used to visit and pray for whenever he passed her village. After a particularly difficult period in bed she bid him to pray for her: "Father pray for me very hard. Pray for me that I die. I am fed up with living. Pray for me that I die quickly and that I am re-born an American. For I know now that I will never have the chance to go there in this life!"

In the case of the Roman Catholic Church, which holds the biggest congregation in Kwahu-Tafo, the dying person should have paid his church dues before he is granted full recognition by the church at the time of his death. If he has failed to do so, relatives may hurry to pay his debts to clear the way for a smooth church burial. In one case, the head of the family even pretended the deceased relative was still alive when he came to pay his remaining dues, hoping to avoid the priest's criticism.

Visits by praying and singing church members, before and after one's death, constitute another sign of good dying. The administration of the 'Sacrament of the Sick' including anointments and Holy Communion, prepares the dying person for his last journey by forgiving his sins. Catholics regard receiving this sacrament as an indicator they are on the path leading towards a good death.

Another prominent contribution to good death is the church's impact on a successful and prestigious funeral. The churches, the Roman Catholic in particular, have at their disposal material, social and religious facilities to raise the status of the funeral and thus increase the esteem awarded to the deceased (and his family!).

The honour which the church allots to a person after his death is an undeniable proof of the person's successful life and, therefore, good death. One old lady was awarded an ecclesiastical award, which gave her funeral extra splendour. An old man, who had devoted a great deal of his life to the church, received the special honour of being laid in state in the church building and had his funeral expenses paid by the church.

A crowded church service is increasingly regarded as an important ingredient of a successful funeral and—by implication—a good death. Funeral booklets, which are now common at funerals of respected people, contain elaborate programmes of the church service with the full texts of the hymns to be sung. The booklet itself, again, contributes to the quality of the funeral.

One could indeed say that the Christian churches have greatly influenced the conceptualisation of 'good death', in particular by the way they have been able to make their presence felt at the funeral. At the same time, however, we should conclude that they have not *altered* the concept of 'good' and 'bad death'. Christian values and beliefs have been largely interpreted and applied to sustain the existing beliefs in what constitutes a good and bad death.

### Ambiguities

Reading over these lines describing 'good and bad death' I realise that my description has been too one dimensional. The ambivalences and paradoxes of people's attitudes to death are missing.

In fact, there is no clear-cut distinction between good and bad death in Kwahu. Depending on their age or position in the social network some people may regard as 'bad' what others praise as 'good'. A clue for this ambivalence can be found in the common statement that: "*Owupa* is to die naturally". Young people sometimes complain that old people die 'unnaturally'. They express resentment at the material and social successes of elderly people who 'refuse' to die. In their eyes some of the elderly are *too* successful and become *too* old. Where the cultural norms prescribe respect for the elderly, a generation conflict shows itself in oblique terms. Behind the back of the elderly, young people may for example complain that the old live too long and that it is 'unnatural' for them to live longer than their children, nephews and nieces. That resentment was usually expressed in terms of witchcraft (*bayie*). The fact that some elderly lived on while young people in the family died prematurely indicated evil practices: the elderly managed to stay alive at the expense of the young.

The elderly were aware of these suspicions. One of them said: "It is because you have grown old that you are called a witch. You don't go (*wonkc*)."<sup>12</sup> One of the elderly turned the accusation of the young around:

That some young people die before the aged is most of the time due to their [young people's] sins. Stealing, adultery and other wrongdoings are rampant in the youth of today and that is the cause of most of their deaths. People they wrong at times, kill them with *juju* or fetish (*Woyè obi bcne a na wabc wo*

<sup>11</sup> For an interesting discussion about the Christian 'translation' of traditional religious concepts in Ewe society in Ghana, see Meyer (1999).

*dua anaasè wato wo aduro na w'awu.*) The aged in the house attained such age thanks to the good things they did. They are not the cause of the deaths of the young.

Both 'parties' claimed their own good death. The elderly emphasised that the early deaths of young people were due to their sins and therefore 'bad', but the others explained and rehabilitated the 'bad deaths' of the young by declaring the deaths of the elderly 'bad' in another sense. One unnaturalness could thus be defused by creating another one.<sup>12</sup>

The concepts of 'good' and 'bad death'; therefore, are not fixed and unchangeable categories. Of course people can explain what is a good or bad death, but the definitions allow some room for manoeuvring. What is good in the eyes of one person can be made bad by a second who holds a different position in the family or for whom different interests are at stake. Moreover a bad death can produce a 'good' (=well attended, dramatic) funeral and may thus be somewhat restored in retrospect. Conversely, the good death of a respected elder may lose its glamour by malicious gossip and post-mortem accusations of witchcraft.

### Conclusion: dying peacefully

The different views and appearances of 'good death' are most felicitously captured in the term 'peaceful'. To die 'in peace' (*asomdwemu*) refers to at least five aspects of what is regarded as a good death. These five varieties of peacefulness bear a striking resemblance with views of death reported from other cultures across the world. As has been stated in the introduction to this issue, contributors set out to paint the cultural variations in the conceptualisation of 'good' and 'bad death', but we soon realised that the similarity of death perceptions across cultures and times was more noteworthy. This certainly holds true for the Kwahu vision of good and bad death. In this concluding discussion I will therefore—sparsely—refer to striking resemblances in the literature on death in other societies.

Good death in Kwahu-Tafo first of all implies that the dying person is in peace with other people. Before one dies conflicts should be ended and enemies reconciled, debts should be paid and promises fulfilled. Someone who has been able to achieve this, is ready for his final departure. He is a real *cpanyi*, a peacemaker, a person who is respected by others. That respect will be shown during the funeral. His children, nephews and nieces, and grandchildren will remember him with affection, long after his death and mention his name during

libation. And if he has built a house for them to live in, that house will bear his name for many years to come (Van der Geest, 1998a).

A good death, writes Counts (1977, p. 370) about Kaliai society, comes after the dying person has had the time to sever his relationships. Everyone will offend someone during his lifetime. That breakage should be repaired before the final rupture by death. Dunkwa's death was untimely because she had not had the chance to make up with her brother. Old people dying while their longevity is resented by the younger generation, die 'badly' in the eyes of the latter because their extended stay among the living was 'stolen' from the young ones, through witchcraft. A life ending in conflict or with unpaid—social—debts is not 'complete'.

A second condition of 'good death' is that the dying person is at peace with his own death. Death is not the great corrupter as Erasmus writes in his *Laus Stultitiae*<sup>13</sup> It is a welcome guest after a well-spent life, as welcome as a good sleep after a day of hard work (see also Van der Geest, 2002b). As the old man Frempong said, he has finished what he came to do and now wants to go. Clearly this form of peace is only possible if the peace with others has been secured. It is this type of peaceful death which advocates of hospice care as well as of euthanasia in Europe envisage (cf. Hill & Shirley, 1992). It is 'dying with dignity'. It is a style of dying which is beautifully described by Klasen (1990) in her study of older people on the Indonesian island of Nias. Elderly celebrate their approaching death with the community of the living. In Kwahu-Tafo it is the death of the *cpanyi* the elderly person who has reached full maturity, who is no more concerned about the things of this world, the ultimate gentleman. An *cpanyi* is, in Glaser and Strauss' (1965) terms, fully aware of his death (see also Kellehear, 1990; Seale et al., 1997). "Knowing death gives tranquillity", Fernandez quotes someone in his voluminous study of a religious movement in Gabon. His acquaintance with death has taught him the cardinal virtue of patience: "My ability to tolerate all the petty irritations of this world comes from knowing death" (Fernandez, 1982, p. 495). This state of stoicism and acceptance of death marks the true *cpanyi*.

Such a death is also peaceful in the sense that it is not caused by aggression. A good death is 'natural', as many of the Kwahu-Tafo elderly emphasised, not caused by human hatred, cruel disease or fatal accident. There are no disgusting symptoms which suggest foul play or sinfulness as for example happened at the death of the

<sup>12</sup>Suspensions of elderly people practicing witchcraft are discussed in Van der Geest (2002a).

<sup>13</sup>For an elaborate and 'best-selling' view of the "terror of death", see Becker, (1973). The philosopher Bloch (1986) in his magnum opus *The principle of hope* and the anthropologist Malinowski (1948) in his famous essay *Magic, science and religion* argue that the fear of death accounts for the genesis of religion, if not culture in general.

old priest Zosima in Dostoyevsky's (1958) novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. The unbearable stench, which came from the dead body, was taken as a sign that after all the priest had not been the holy man many had believed him to be during his life. A violent or cruel death indicates some fault and is seen as punishment. The same applies to a death full of pain.

Hinton (1994) found that cancer patients in England who died in full awareness of their death were more likely to die at home (or in a hospice) than those who resisted and denied their death (see also Seale, 1995; Seale et al., 1997). This brings us to the fourth aspect of peacefulness, that is to die in a place which holds the highest degree of peace: home. Dying at home implies being surrounded by relatives, good company.<sup>14</sup> To die away from home is by definition 'bad', which can only partly be repaired by bringing the dead body home. During my stay in Kwahu-Tafo a young man of the town was killed by robbers near Abidjan in Ivory Coast. His death was violent and untimely, and therefore bad, but the fact that it happened far away, added to its negativity. The tragic character of dying abroad was mentioned in many stories that people told me about relatives who travelled to Europe or America. In most of these stories the body could not be brought home, giving the death its ultimate senselessness. Dying abroad is also the theme of the third case in the Highlife song I quoted earlier on.

Dying away from home usually means dying away from relatives and dear ones, in loneliness, without anyone giving you some water to drink for your final journey or receiving your last breath as is described in Klasen's (1990) account of Nias. In Nias society it is a disgrace to die away from home. A 'favourite' offence is to tell someone that his father died on the street, unceremoniously, as a poor man. In Oscar Lewis' (1969) novel *A death in the Sanchez family* someone's dying while no one is around is described as a serious failure. In 'western' society dying 'alone' is becoming more common as people grow older and 'social death' makes its entry before physical death (Glaser & Strauss, 1965; Sudnow, 1967; Elias, 1985; Mulkay, 1993).

The last sense of peacefulness is that *others* have peace with someone's death for reasons covered by the four previous types of 'peace': because the person has completed his life; it has been good and 'enough'. The death of the person may also be welcomed because the relatives are tired of caring for the old person, but that kind of 'peace' will rarely be mentioned openly.

Summing up these five sorts of peace accomplished in the event of good death we may 'categorise' good death as having a *social* character (being at peace with others, mutually), a *psychological* or *spiritual* character (being at peace with one's own life and 'soul'), a *time* aspect (dying in the fullness of time) and a *spatial* aspect (dying at home, surrounded by relatives).

Writing about Hindu rituals in Britain, Firth (2001, p. 238) describes 'good death' as: "a conscious death at the right place (at home), and time, having dealt with unfinished business, said goodbye..." That 'definition' suits the Kwahu concept of good death, which I have tried to summarise as a 'peaceful death'. We must however keep in thought that the 'goodness' or 'peacefulness' of death lies in the eyes—and interests—of the beholders. There is considerable ambiguity in the quality of dying. Someone's death can be good for others (but not for the dying person) because it is orderly as is described by Komaromy and Hockey (2001) for deaths in a residential home in Britain, or more cynically, because it is convenient to the doctor (Voninsky, 2001). A Dutch proverb appropriately says: "One man's death is another man's bread." The opposite also occurs, as we have seen in the reactions of young people in Kwahu-Tafo to the deaths of very old people. What some regard as a good and timely death, others see as bad and untimely.

Comparing the notions of good and bad death in Kwahu-Tafo with those in other societies which are discussed in this volume (e.g. Spronk, Counts & Counts), one is struck by the similarities between cultures that seem so far apart. Dying after a long and well-spent life, after having solved arguments and conflicts, in the company of dear ones, without pain, while at peace with one's one death, are all features which also in my own culture would contribute to a good death.<sup>15</sup> One difference may be the stigmatisation of people who die with unpleasant symptoms or in tragic circumstances. It is my impression, however, that such stigmatisation is disappearing rapidly in Kwahu-Tafo. The most conspicuous difference at this moment is the minimal role of professional medical assistance in Kwahu-Tafo in constructing death as good. The technologies of palliative care (and/or euthanasia), which feature so prominently at the end of life in Dutch society, are entirely absent in Kwahu-Tafo.

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, now an opposite tendency exists: Some want their elders to die in a hospital, as this will give them the right to lower costs in the use of the mortuary (for the meaning of the 'fridge' in contemporary funeral celebrations, see Van der Geest, 2000, p. 128; De Witte, 2001, pp. 120–21).

<sup>15</sup> In the Dutch language one also speaks of a 'beautiful death' (*mooie dood*), which may have a slightly different meaning. A death is often called 'beautiful' if the deceased died suddenly, without pain and other suffering. Such a death is not 'good' to those who stay behind as they have not been able to say farewell, but they comfort themselves by pointing out the advantage for the deceased who did not suffer (see also Pool, this issue).

“Dying, like living, was and is steeped in social convention”, Small and Hockey (2001, p. 101) remark. This certainly holds for the attitude to death which elderly people in Kwahu-Tafo report. It is difficult to ascertain how much social pretence is involved in their calm resignation to death (Owusu-Sarpong, 2000; Van der Geest, 2002b). It does not befit an *panyin* to be afraid of death or to complain about pain or other bodily inconveniences. His self-restraint with regard to material and physical pleasure also applies to displeasure. If living with dignity is the adage of the elderly person it implies dying with dignity as well. Dying peacefully is indeed socially and culturally prescribed for the *panyin*.

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