



## THE IMAGE OF DEATH IN AKAN HIGHLIFE SONGS OF GHANA

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### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Anthropologists and sociologists are becoming increasingly interested in literary imagination as a source of information about human society. The numerous studies of African novels carried out by social scientists are a case in point. The question as to the scientific relevance of such an analysis of "fiction" is still being discussed (cf. Schippers-de Leeuw 1977). Methodological problems become even more intricate if we turn to poetry. Poetry, as a rule, attempts to speak in an indirect, metaphorical way that makes its interpretation somewhat hazardous. Moreover, in poetry the personal vision of the poet stands central and the reflection of social reality loses importance. Modern poetry has a unique and personal character and seems little suited for sociological analysis. Traditional poetry contains other pitfalls for the social scientist. It shares with modern poetry obscure and ambiguous language; furthermore, it has a mythical character and tends to present ideal and ideological

values rather than actual social phenomena. Modern poets who want to draw from their traditions often bring this ideological element into their work.

Content analysis of African poetry, for example, may come up with interesting information but its sociological value is doubtful. Thus Moore's (1968) article on the concept of death in both traditional and modern African poetry presents six themes concerning the reaction to death, but we are left with the question whether these reactions exist in the minds of the individual poets, belong to ideology and prescribed behavior, or actually exist at all.<sup>2</sup>

Popular literature seems a better source for social scientists, as it is more likely to reflect common behavior and thinking. It is written for the masses and enjoyed by them. There are, however, still a number of obstacles to be dealt with. Popular literature may well have an escapist character as, for example, Wertheim (1964; p. 317) and Scott (1976; p. 233) argue. Lowenthal (1961; p. 160) for that reason hypothesizes that in periods of economic recession and crisis stories are more likely to have a happy ending than they are in periods of prosperity. In other words, literature does not necessarily have to be a reflection of society, it may also be a flight from it. Another problem is that literature may play an active role in changing a society. To cite one example, Peacock (1968) argues that Ludruk, a form of popular theatre in Java, encourages the "modernization" of Java because it emphasizes such values as "bureaucratization, centralization, monetization, and conjugalization."

In spite of these methodological problems I believe that popular literature can be used for sociological analysis. An anthropologist who has acquired both a general and a detailed view of a community is in a particularly favorable position to judge the roles that popular theatre and other literary expressions play in that community. Once this important observation has been made, the study of popular literature can produce valuable *additional* information about such a community (cf. Fabian 1978).

An example of popular art in Ghana is Highlife.<sup>3</sup> Highlife encompasses a variety of artistic expressions: music, dancing, singing, storytelling, and theatre. It originated at the end of the nineteenth century and has clearly been influenced by western music. At the same time Ghanaians consider it their own music and Hanna (1975) calls it, for that reason, "new traditional." The exact origin of Highlife is not known, but from the 1920s on, its history is well documented (see Bame 1975; Collins 1976a and 1976b). It started

on the coast but has now spread over the whole of southern Ghana. It seems that at first urban life and social mobility were the predominant themes in Highlife songs. The term *Highlife* suggests that too; it reflected the life of the "high (Ghanaian) society" in towns. In that period Highlife probably played a "modernizing" role. At present there are about fifty Highlife bands in Ghana (Collin's estimate) that deal with a wide variety of subjects, urban as well as rural, modern as well as traditional, true events as well as fables. In general we can say, however, that Highlife tells about the common problems of life in southern Ghana. Highlife bands usually start their performance with a play<sup>4</sup> and end with a number of Highlife songs.

In this paper I am concerned with the songs only. Approximately one hundred Highlife songs have been transcribed and translated. In thirty-one of these the topic of death is touched upon.<sup>5</sup> I have attempted to make an inventory of how the reality of death is depicted in these thirty-one songs. My thesis is that Highlife songs will present a truer picture of popular beliefs about death than do myths, traditional songs, and modern poetry.

## 2. *Data Collecting*

During field work in a rural Akan town I realized the immense popularity of Highlife music. Every evening a large group of young people assembled in front of the local canteen to dance and listen to Highlife music, which resounded from the amplifiers over the road and the surrounding compounds. The canteen itself was usually empty but I estimate that on ordinary evenings fifty to a hundred people were standing in front of it. Apart from the music they were attracted by the light (the rest of the town was without electricity) and of course by the fact that members of the opposite sex were there and a rendezvous could be made for the night. Women and children were present to sell bread and tea, fried plantain, and other snacks. Around 10:00 the canteen stopped its "broadcasting," the lights went off, and the people dispersed.

The attractiveness of Highlife music lies both in the music and in the text. Although I had studied the Akan language, I was not able to understand the text of the songs, so I asked someone to translate one song for me. The content of this text aroused my interest to such an extent that I decided to collect as many Highlife songs as possible. Various people helped me—school pupils, teachers, university students, and others. After recording the songs I had them first transcribed into the Akan language and then trans-

lated. Both transcription and translation proved to be laborious and difficult tasks. Proverbial and transfigural speech caused many problems and I am not sure that the texts that I finally acquired are without mistakes or misinterpretations. I hope that one day a more professional and complete collection will replace this defective one. All songs that I got hold of and that contained some kind of story were translated. At the moment I have one hundred songs. These songs are not a random sample of all Highlife songs, but I surmise that those popular between 1970 and 1978 are well represented. Most of them are about problems of life and remind one of the ballads and folksongs in European cultures. Recurrent themes are misery brought about by poverty, loneliness, gossip, or hatred from relatives, marriage problems, and death. A number of them are love songs, but compared with European popular music their proportion is definitely small.

The collection of Highlife texts is made even more difficult because of the commercial interests that are attached to them. My few attempts to approach the bands themselves produced no results. A visit to the family house of Ampadu, probably the most popular Highlife singer of Ghana, taught me that his people (Ampadu himself was not there) were extremely reluctant to reveal to me anything about the texts and suspected me of financial goals.

My enquiries about Highlife songs were closely linked with the rest of my field work, mostly participant observation in a matrilineage of a rural town. I carried out investigations into various aspects of family life such as marriage and divorce, nonmarital sexual relations, birth control, inheritance, and witchcraft rumors. The participatory character of my research confronted me with death in the lineage, the town and the surrounding towns. Without this form of participation I would probably not have discovered the importance of Highlife music and I would have found it much harder to interpret its content.

Highlife music is superseding such traditional forms of music as funeral dirges and Adowa, certainly among the younger generation. During funerals, I observed that young people took little part in traditional rituals of singing and dancing and converged in canteens where they danced and wailed to the tunes of Highlife (cf. Bleek 1975; pp. 68-69)

### *3. Traditional Views of Death*

Although funerals are important in Akan society, no serious study of Akan funerals and traditional views of death has ever been made, at least as far as I know. Such a study has been carried out among the

Lo Dagaa of northern Ghana (Goody 1962). Nketia (1954; p. 6) mentions a study on Akan funerals by Busia but I am not aware that Busia's study has ever been published. In this brief presentation of traditional beliefs I shall draw upon Rattray's (1927) early observations and the studies of Nketia (1954) and Sarpong (1974), both Akan scholars. Rattray (1927; p. 106) writes:

Death was merely a transition, like birth, from one kind of life to another. Although it would nowadays be far from correct to state that an Ashanti would as soon be dead as alive, nevertheless his outlook even now with regard to his exact position after death is not filled with any vague, troublesome misgivings as to what the hereafter may hold in store for him.

The traditional belief is further described by Nketia (1954; p. 6) as follows:

It is believed that there is a world of the dead built on much the same pattern as that of this world and that when a person dies he goes to his Ancestors. There are beliefs in the visitations of the dead, invisible participation of the dead in the life of this world and in the continuation of ties of kithship and kinship after death. Consequently, the living are anxious to keep up good relations with the dead, to remember them, to show concern for them, to identify themselves with them and to ask their favour. Nevertheless death is not regarded as a happy and welcome event.

This belief is also expressed in the funeral dirges collected by Nketia. In these traditional laments the continuing ties with the deceased are strongly emphasized. The deceased is often praised for his excellent attributes, his hometown and ancestors are mentioned, and family cohesion across the boundaries of death is a central theme.

The idea of reincarnation is skirted by Nketia although many Akan have assured me that it belongs to the kernel of Akan religion. Rattray (1927; p. 319) remarks that a *saman* (ghost, spirit, ancestor) "goes to live in the spirit world to await a chance of reincarnation." Sarpong (1974; p. 40) writes "Reincarnation is a firm belief among Ghanaians," and he explains that "any ancestor who considers that his work on earth was not completed before he died may decide to come back to complete it. Many people are thought to be reincarnations of ancestors" (1974; p. 39). It is interesting to note that

reincarnation is also presented as a genuine Akan belief in a popular publication about Asante culture (Tufuo and Donkor 1969; pp. 91–92). In a recent study of an Akan town the process of life-death-rebirth is described as “cyclical migration” (Barble n. d., p. 453).

#### 4. *Death in Highlife Songs*

The various contexts and connotations of death in Highlife songs can be divided into seven themes that I shall deal with separately.

##### 4.1 *The Mother's Death*

The most common theme is that of the mother's death and it seems reasonable to argue that this is regarded as the most terrible death. There is no way to describe the gruesome reality of death more clearly than by referring to the death of one's mother. There is no need to produce psychological and sociological explanations as to why this should be so, although it may be useful to mention that the Akan are matrilineal. The pivotal position of a mother in one's life is well illustrated by the fact that someone without a mother is regarded as someone “without anybody.” A proverb says: If your mother has died, your family is finished (*wo ni wu a, wo abusua asa*).<sup>6</sup> This view contrasts sharply with the view that a person has many mothers, which suggests that the one mother can be replaced by the other, but this suggestion is not true. This view is only acceptable as long as the “real” mother is still alive but proves seriously inadequate at the moment of her death.

The extent to which a mother is felt to be irreplaceable shows itself in the great number of songs about being an orphan. No less than nine songs mention the lot of an orphan. The life of an orphan seems to have become the preeminent example of a miserable life (see also Bleek 1975; p. 304–11).

In the first text that I quote the singer describes the emptiness that has been left behind after the death of the mother and tries to comfort the orphan by saying that it does not help to cry, because “this is the way death treats every living being.”

Gyaesu [Stop crying] by African Brothers

Stop weeping, someone's child, stop weeping,  
don't weep orphan.  
There is a difference between a grown up and a child.

It is painful when a mother dies but what can you do, orphan?  
 It is from man that you can get comfort.  
 Someone's orphan, very sorry for you, but keep up courage.  
 It is a new day and death is again with us.  
 Mother, death wanted her and nothing could be  
 done to save her.  
 She has fought and lost.  
 So from today you will no more be pampered by her.  
 The one to whom you could go when you felt hungry  
 is no more.

The one who used to cook food and to call you to eat is  
 no more.  
 That is the reason that everyone expresses his sorrow  
 for you.  
 Stop weeping and cast all your burden on God.  
 For God is like a monkey that lives in the trees.  
 If you befriend him, he will never let your *kotokro*<sup>7</sup> remain  
 up there.  
 Orphan, take courage, my friend and orphan,  
 stop weeping because this is the way death treats every  
 living being.

There is no real reference to life hereafter as a source of comfort. The term *ghost world* (*Asamondo*) is only used as a synonym for death and the presence of God is only mentioned to remind the orphan of the fact that God is there to help him in this life.

Other songs describing an orphan's life (e.g. "Hini me" and "Aku Sika") do not mention a source of comfort in the hereafter. Nowhere is the suggestion made that the deceased mother can exert influence on her child's life. Death is taken very seriously as is shown in yet another song about the plight of an orphan:

"Ade aye me" [Disaster has fallen on me] by African Brothers

Oh my people, every death is painful,  
 but that of a mother is most painful.  
 The children she leaves behind may be too young.  
 Perhaps no one will take care of them and they  
 will be wandering on earth sorrowfully.  
 No place, no person to put their hope on.  
 Oh disaster has fallen on you.  
 Oh disaster has fallen on me.

Tears start flowing anytime I open my eyes.  
Disaster has fallen on me.  
Oh my people, every orphan is pitiful.  
When my mother died, I was thinking that she left  
a “shepherd”<sup>8</sup> for me.  
One evening, after the meal, I went outside to play with  
my friend. I was late, so I ran home, but when I reached  
the house, the door was closed. I became afraid and  
knocked on the door, several times, but there was no  
one who loved me and opened the door.  
If only my mother had been alive, she would have  
tried to open the door by any possible means because of  
her love for her children.  
But since my mother is no more I have to sleep  
outside till the morning.  
Oh disaster has fallen on me  
Oh my mother’s death, disaster has fallen on me.  
Oh I am crying in sorrow.

Another song, “Maame Adwoa” [Mother Adwoa], also describes  
the misery of children after their mother’s death:

Oh mother Adwoa, your death pains us and makes us  
worry. Your children are weeping.  
Oh mother Adwoa, what are we to do now?  
Your children are weeping.  
Oh mother Adwoa, because you are absent now.  
Your house will be filled with dirt,  
and your children will be miserable.

Other songs may not deal so explicitly with the mother’s death  
but many have one or two lines referring to it as the most sorrow-  
ful event that can befall someone.

An orphan is to be pitied.  
My mother, who would help me, is dead and buried  
at the cemetery. I am a small boy, left alone in  
the world to face hardship.  
(“Onni-bie asem ye mmobo”)

My mother was a good parent.  
She has gone to the ghost world, full of sorrow.  
She went without telling me.



What should I do?  
 My relatives have rejected me.  
 Where can I go?  
 (“Ofie Nwansena”)

So far we have been looking at death from the point of view of the child. From the standpoint of the mother, however, the most tragic death is when her child dies before her or when she has no children to bury her and to weep during her funeral. So, although the mother’s death is generally regarded as a terrible blow, it is accepted that it has to come one day. One might perhaps say that in spite of resistance to her death there is something good in the rule that children bury their mother. When this rule is not realized, a terrible shock and a threat to the meaning of life is experienced. The problem of a mother not being buried by her son is discussed in the following text:

“Owuo [Death] by Konadu’s Band”

Merciless and wicked death,  
 before you nothing is beautiful.  
 My mother brought me forth, me alone without  
 a brother or sister  
 She has put her hope on me that I shall  
 bury her in future  
 But I am afraid of you, death.  
 Please, death, don’t call me yet, let me stay  
 to bury my old mother, because she has done  
 so much for me.  
 What every woman looks forward to is that she  
 gets children who, after her death, will prepare  
 her body nicely, lay her in state, and  
 bury her the next day . . . . .  
 So, please death, let me stay to bury my mother.

Another song describes the sorrow of a woman, Yaa Boahemaa, who has no children:

“Yaa Boahemaa” by All Brothers”

Yaa Boahemaa intends to mourn for herself  
 during her lifetime, because when she dies  
 no one will mourn for her.

Childbirth is not bought, it is a gift from God.  
Yaa Boahemaa's womb has been wicked to her.  
What can she do about it?  
God will provide, Yaa, God will provide.  
Yaa Boahemaa intends to mourn for herself . . . .

The tragedy of not being able to bury one's mother or to attend the funeral is sometimes mentioned casually in a few lines. For example by C. K. Mann in "Ennye nn" [Not today] :

The message of my mother's death did not reach me.  
Not today ooh, not today  
The message of my mother's death did not reach me . . . .

#### 4.2 *The Father's Death*

Although it is not possible to speak about the father-child relationship in general terms, it seems reasonable to argue that among the matrilineal Akan many fathers play a more or less marginal role with regard to their children. Traditional roles of descent and inheritance tend to place the father outside the interests of his own wife and children. In 40 percent of rural marriages this juridical separation is further aggravated by residential separation. In these cases a man lives with his matrikin while the mother and the children reside with her matrikin. Another factor contributed to the man's marginality is a woman's economic independence. Some women do not really need a man's financial support; others get only minimal financial assistance. If a man is well-to-do, however, there is usually no question of marginality. Rich men in rural places have their wives and children with them and play a central role in their conjugal families. The same trend occurs among the urban elite where husbands have increased their powers at the cost of those of their wives. A good father is, therefore, primarily regarded as a breadwinner. The songs deal with a father's death in terms of financial loss.

In the first song the singer expresses this thought by saying that you are lucky when your father is wealthy, influential, and still alive.

"Oheneba" [Chief's child] by Teacher and his Africana

Oheneba is the one whose father is still alive . . . .  
During the time your father is living, you may think that

your uncles, nephews and cousins love you,  
 but after your father's death you will see how much  
 they "loved" you!  
 I did not expect that my end would come this way.  
 I never dreamt of such a humiliation.  
 My father was rich and prosperous, so I thought I would  
 remain an Oheneba till my death . . . .  
 When, as a child, I was mischievous, my father always  
 said "As long as I am alive, I shall not let you down, but  
 remember, soon I shall leave you and then you will see  
 how the world is" . . . .  
 When my father died, he did not leave me substantial  
 property for my living.  
 I can do any type of work, but my problem is that nobody  
 wants to help me  
 Whenever I ask people for a loan, they ask "Have you  
 finished all your father's money and have you now started  
 to wander about?  
 Really, Oheneba is the one whose father is still alive . . . .

Konadu too sings about the death of the one who supported him:

"Asaase asa [The world is finished] by Konadu

We do not cry because of death itself,  
 but because of what happens after it.  
 Maybe the deceased was your supporter,  
 maybe he was the one feeding you.  
 Now he has left you in sorrow.

In the same vein someone else is singing:

"Merebre" [I am suffering] by Pat Thomas and the Sweet Beans

All these sufferings in life are not for me alone, but for  
 the sake of my children, their food, clothing and education.  
 That is why I am working so hard,  
 so that after my death my children don't suffer on earth.

#### 4.3 *The Death of a Beloved*

Most songs picture the terror of death by relating the death of a person who is most dear, often the mother but also anyone else—

a wife or husband, a lover, a friend, another relative. The constant threat of death cannot be better visualized than by the death of a person in whose presence one wants to be as much as possible; the destructiveness of death cannot be better expressed than by the annihilation of the one who personifies the beauty and warmth of life. A proverb says: "What you love, death also loves" (Nea wodo no na owu do no). This thought is vividly expressed in the following song:

"M'adamfo pa" [My best friend] by the Parrots

My best friend will depart from me, aaah.  
 My best friend will leave me,  
     how can I live without him . . . .  
 A prominent man is hated by people in this world.  
 Good people die quickly on earth.  
 Someone who works hard is envied.  
 My best friend will go away,  
     how can I live without him . . . .  
 Kwaku Duro will go away,  
     how can I live without him.  
 A good wife is she who takes my problems as her own.  
 She takes care of me and devotes her love and time to me.  
 My beloved wife will depart from me,  
 How can I live without her . . . .  
 A good husband is he who has patience with me,  
     who takes care of me.  
 He gives his whole life and time and love to me alone.  
 My beloved husband will depart from me,  
     how can I live without him . . . .

In another song, "Asem bi adi bone" [Something serious has occurred] Konadu sings:

I prepared breakfast,  
     thinking my lover will come and eat it,  
 I expected her; she did not come.  
 My lover has gone away,  
     and died somewhere on the road.

Still another song by Konadu, "Adamfo pa" [Good friend], expresses the sorrows of someone who has lost a best friend. That person becomes confused and starts to behave in a strange way. Extreme

sadness about the death of a beloved is also the main theme of the song "Awisiaa" [Orphan] by African Brothers. Neither of the two songs is quoted here.

Sometimes love is contrasted with death. The effect is that love looks more attractive and death more gruesome. Two examples of such contrast:

"Onipa nse hwee" [Man is nothing] by African Brothers

Kwasi, yes, really let us say it.  
 If you are living with your brother, in love and in peace,  
     it is good.  
 Love? It is a great thing.  
 Brothers let us love each other.  
 Because of death, man is nothing, tomorrow he is dead.  
 Dwasi, yes, last time when Kwame Atta was involved  
     in a case, do you know what happened?  
 What happened?  
 His friend, Yaw Boakye gave him £150 to settle  
 the case. What do you think this means?  
 It is love.  
 Brothers let us love each other  
 Because of death, man is nothing, tomorrow he is dead . . . .

"Asiko Darling" by Eddie Donkor

I have my Asiko Darling, Darling,  
     let me please her.  
 Aaaaah, in the grave it will be very hot,  
     so let her please me and make me enjoy.

#### *4.4 Death is Inescapable*

Closely connected with the death of the beloved is the idea that death is inescapable. However much one loves someone, however hard one works, however good and famous one is, death comes one day. In a song quoted above it is the good people who die first. The reason behind this statement is probably that people who are successful in life are easily envied by others and liable to be attacked by witchcraft or other evil. Mostly, however, the idea that death spares nobody is not much linked up with the belief in witchcraft or other mystical, intentional, causes of death. In the songs that have been collected, death is regarded much more as an

inescapable blind fate. Allusions to witchcraft do occur in a number of other songs but more in a context of poverty, sickness, and hatred of relatives. Several proverbs say that death comes to everyone, for example: "The green leaf falls and the withered one also falls" (Mommono te, na guanee te). Sarpong (1974; p. 23) quotes a number of very expressive proverbs without the original Akan text. Two of them say: "When death overtakes you, you cannot say: look, there is an old woman, take her," and "If both your father-in-law and death appoint a day for you to do some work, it is death's work which you will do first." The inescapability of death is the central theme of the next song.

"Obre biara twa owuo" [All hard work ends up in death]  
by African Brothers

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.  
Some friendships are stronger than the bonds with  
brothers or sisters.  
Because of her love for the 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, so every toil 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 here 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?  
 So, what we will say is that  
 all hard work ends up in death.  
 Aaah, hard work ends up in death.

The idea that the end of death will come to every human being is expressed very realistically in the following song:

"Owuo mpe sika" [Death does not like money] by Konadu

Death does not like money oo! Konadu ee!  
 We shall all enter a hole in the earth, this death hmm!  
 If even there were two chances to die, I would not joke  
 with one.

You will be put in a coffin.  
The coffin will be nailed.  
You will be sent to the cemetery.  
While you are being carried away,  
your head will be in front, your  
legs at the back.  
Your people will surround you.  
Some will be dancing, others will be  
conversing about you.  
You will reach the cemetery.  
Put in a grave.  
Covered with sand.  
Hit by the shovel.  
You will be left there while they return home.  
Death is cruel.

#### *4.5 No Return from Death*

That death is final seems to be implied in all songs, but this idea is not always stated explicitly. The tragedy of the death of a mother or beloved applies only if that person cannot return to life. A proverb has it: "No one climbs the ladder of death and returns."

One song in which the definitive character of death is mentioned very explicitly is

"Onipa wu a, na wawu" [If someone dies, he is dead] by Konadu

When a man dies, it is the end.  
I have never met my lover since she died, so I believe it.  
When a person dies, it is the end.  
I have never met my mother since she died, so I believe this.  
If we say the deceased is coming to send us something, we lie.  
Or when we say that the deceased will write to us, it is  
a big lie.  
If there is bread sold in the other world, I don't know  
anybody who has eaten it.  
Whether it is mixed with sugar,  
whether there is salt in it, no one knows.  
Nobody has ever eaten it.  
Death ends everything.  
My father was very fond of me,  
It is a long time ago since he died, but I have never  
seen him again, not even in a dream.



When a man dies, it is the end.  
I have never seen my mother since she died.

In "Awisiaa" [Orphan] a band called Nananom sing:

If the ghost world really exists,  
Aggie [the deceased] would send something to me.

The final character of death is also mentioned by Ampadu:

"Nea obiara pe no momma no nye" [Let everyone do what  
he wants] by African Brothres

If Mr. Amo likes drinking, let him drink.  
As someone said, "we come to this world only once."  
After death you do not come back to life again . . . .

It should further be noted that no song expresses the idea that death is not the end, that the deceased will stay on with us as an ancestor or will come back to life as another person. The idea that there is no return from death is omnipresent.

#### 4.6 Death as Punishment

In his study of mortuary customs among the Lo Daga of northern Ghana Goody (1962; pp. 375-78) emphasizes the importance of the idea of retribution after death ("in the next world"), although it is not seen as oppressive. The idea of retribution after death is less emphasized in the traditional Akan world view. Some informants trying to remember the "doctrine" (rather than their own views) mentioned that bad people were not allowed to join the ancestors after their death. Nketia (1955; p. 44, emphasis mine) writes:

death is regarded as the occasion when a deceased person sets out on a journey to the underworld (*nseedo*) or spirit world (*asamando*) to which his Ancestors have already gone, a place where he must *settle any accounts* he has with those who have gone before him. His journey is arduous and unavoidable. Once he sets foot on it, he cannot and should not come back except as a divine ancestor spirit. But *if he has been particularly wicked in his life time*, or something has gone wrong before his journey or in the course of it, *he might not*

*be admitted to the world of spirits*; he must hover round houses unable to come back to life or join the dead.

The idea of reward or punishment after death does not occur in the Highlife songs known to me. Death itself is, however, occasionally described as a punishment. The absence of retribution after death agrees with the "this-world-centredness" noted by Sarpong (1974; p. 22). People want to be rewarded within their own lifetimes rather than to look forward to a reward thereafter. According to this way of thinking it is not surprising that death is seen as a punishment for it puts an end to all the blessings of life.

A text that presents death as a punishment can be found in a song by the African Brothers, "Sika anibere da owu afa" [Lust for money leads to death]. The song tells a long story about a man who is possessed by greed. When someone finds a metal box on his land he claims it for himself, hoping to find treasure in it. When the box is opened in the presence of the chief it is found to contain the skull of a human body. It is that of the chief's daughter who has disappeared some years previously. The man is now revealed as the murderer and is executed. The refrain of the song is: "Lust for money lies in the path of death."

In this context another song by the African Brothers, "Bone a wobeye biara" [Any evil you will do], should be noted. It tells the story of a murderer who escapes punishment through the efforts of his lawyer. When, after the hearing in court he goes to the lawyer's house to thank him and present him with gifts, the lawyer refuses the gifts and says:

For every evil you will do on earth,  
You will get your reward here on earth.  
As for me, I only used the law to set you free,  
So my brother, go and judge the matter with  
Your God.

Here again the song suggests that retribution will not take place after death but here on earth.

#### *4.7 Ego's Own Death and Funeral*

To judge from the texts relating to death, the problem of death is felt more poignantly in the death of another who is loved than it is in the possibility of one's own death. In other words, it seems that death, as a problem, affects me more when those who are

close to me die than when I die myself. Where this view applies, it is typically centered on this world. There are no anxious questions about what will happen to me after my death; I am mainly worried about what will happen to me now that my mother or my beloved has died.

Concern about one's own death is, however, mentioned in three songs and one of these seems to suggest that concern about other people's death is closely linked up with fear for one's own. This association can be explained in several ways.

1. Someone else's death reminds me of my own future death.
2. My participation in someone else's funeral is transformation or projection of my own fear of death; in other words, I am subconsciously attending my own funeral.
3. By attending another person's funeral and making it a "success." I am preparing the ground for a great and successful funeral for myself. Attendance at funerals rests on the principle of reciprocity so if I do not attend other people's funerals I should not expect other people to come to my funeral.

Concern for one's own funeral derives from the belief that a successful funeral is the proof of a successful life. Furthermore, the weeping and crying, which take place at the death of other people and are vividly reflected in these Highlife songs, should not only be understood as genuine signs of despair about how to continue to live after someone's departure, but also—to put it in cold analytic terms—as a means for making the funeral a success. The more people cry and mourn, the more it is assumed that the deceased was an excellent person whose death is bitterly felt by every member of the community and the greater is the success of the funeral. As African Brothers put it: "It is during someone's death, that we get to know about his hard work."

It is my impression that concern for one's own death is more prominent than the song texts suggest and that it is often hidden in the attention that is given to other people's deaths. The prospect of one's own death is mentioned in the following three texts:

"Onipa nse hwee" [Man is nothing] by African Brothers

Kwame, when I die, come and mourn for me.  
For you know that we have sworn that if one of us  
dies, the other will attend his funeral for the whole  
world to see that love is a good thing.

My brother, young man, if your friend's beard  
catches fire, get water ready for your own.  
The Asante have a proverb saying,  
"The house looks at what happened to Yeboah."  
In the same way, the stick that death used to  
strike Takyi will also be used to strike Kwateng.

When you are lying in state,  
your friends and relatives will weep and say  
that they will go with you.  
My sister or brother, your neighbour is dead.  
He is dressed up and laid in state,  
covered with *kente*,<sup>9</sup> his hands on his chest.  
The end has come and people are weeping.  
If you come across such a thing,  
mourn for yourself, because not everybody  
who dies has his body brought home  
and has a funeral prepared for him.  
All the I-will-go-with-you's are just said for nothing.  
when you are lying in state  
your friends and relatives will weep and say  
that they will go with you.  
This sounds at the same time as a joke and as real.  
But when you are put in the grave,  
everybody will remain standing aside and weep,  
saying that they are finished and that you have  
left them on the road.

Fear for one's own death is also expressed in the song "Owuo"  
[Death] by Konadu's Band, in which the singer prays that death  
will not call him before his mother. This song has been quoted  
above. Concern for a great and successful funeral appears in a few  
lines of a song by the African Brothers, "Nea obiara pe no momma  
no nye" [Let everybody do what he likes] .

The day of my death, it will be a great day.  
when they announce that Nana Ampadu is no more,  
there will be palaver.  
Those who want to cry will do so.  
Those who want to drink will do so.  
My favourite cloth will be torn into pieces  
and tied around wrists as watches.

I shall be put in a coffin, and there will be palaver.  
There will be much palaver that day, the day of my death.

My assumption is that the preoccupation with other people's death might well be regarded as a transformation of the fear of one's own death. Much more refined observation and testing are necessary to investigate this assumption.

##### *5. Denial or Recognition of Death?*

Death will always remain a controversial and inexhaustible topic, since no living being can claim to be an expert on it. True, some studies extend their field or research to the threshold of death (e.g. Moody 1976, in which 150 people who had experienced "a clinical death" are interviewed), but no one has yet been able to include in his research the area on the other side of the threshold. We should, however, keep in mind that most studies of death, this one included, do not deal with death itself but with the ideas of the living about death. This topic, however, is as inexhaustible as that of death itself because the variety of ideas about the unknown is by definition unlimited. In this section I shall make some general remarks about the attitude to death as it appears in the Akan Highlife songs and compare this image of death with the image that has been represented as the traditional one.

In a penetrating article Kloos (1974) compares the cultural institutions concerned with death in four societies: Eskimo, Nuer, Lo Daga, and Akuriyo (Surinamese Indians). His conclusion is that two of these societies are characterized by resistance to, or even denial of, death while the other two accept it even to the point of deliberate senicide. Although I can see the purpose of bringing resistance and denial into one category, for both are averse to death and try to escape it, I am not altogether happy with this association. At the level of human behavior, denial of death may lead to very different actions than does resistance to death. Denial of death (as a reality) may well bring about acceptance of death (as a nonreality). For, if death does not exist, we need not be afraid "to die." Denial of death is prominent in Christian religious literature. To quote one text: "For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Corinthians 5:1). This denial of the reality of death, or attitude of not taking death seriously, made it possible for martyrs to lay down their lives readily and for believers to die with great composure.<sup>10</sup>

If, however, the fear of death prevails in human intercourse, this fear should be taken as an indication that the denial of death has not been realized except, perhaps, on a very limited scale. This situation seems to be the case for the Akan perception of death as it appears in the songs under examination but also, to some extent, as it is conveyed to us by students of tradition. Nketia (1955; p. 6) remarks that death is not a welcome event and Sarpong (1974; p. 22) writes that, although life after death "is a life of happiness and justice. Yet the Ghanaian is not eager to attain it . . . He wants wealth, fame, children, peace, long life, position, and so on, here on earth; and he prays for these, never for a future life of bliss after death."

Whereas the traditional vision is full of ambiguity—denial on the one hand, fear on the other—the image of death that emerges from Highlife songs is unequivocal. Death is not denied; on the contrary, it is pictured as a gruesome reality and the most terrible threat to life. Thoughts about the menace of death are not suppressed but are repeatedly expressed in the songs that people love the most and that can be heard at any time at any place. The traditional view of death as a transition to another world has left no trace in the texts of Highlife music.

The three elements of denial that are present in traditional Akan thinking about death—the role of ancestors, reincarnation, and retribution after death—are not found in the Highlife songs. No song expresses the idea that a deceased ancestor will continue to look after the living; on the contrary, a large number of songs ask "God" to take care of the bereaved. The deceased are obviously out of the race; their role is finished. The pitiful state of the orphan, the proverbial example of a miserable life, confirms this interpretation. Nowhere is it suggested that the orphan has a powerful advocate in the person of his deceased mother; nor is reincarnation mentioned in the texts. The emphasis is rather on the fact that there is no return from death. Finally, retribution after death is never mentioned; on the contrary, the texts tend to say that punishment and reward will be received within this life or that death itself is a punishment.

In conclusion, it is not denial, but rather recognition, that is the main characteristic of the attitude to death. This recognition becomes transformed into resistance to death. The recognition of death as an inescapable reality constitutes the main reason for resisting it so firmly.

The objection could be made that it is not right to look for religious ideas about a life hereafter in the texts of popular folk songs. Folksongs are usually profane. They derive their popularity

from their emphasis on the pleasures or sorrows of the earthly life. Although this objection seems to apply to the greater part of present western folk music, it certainly does not hold true for Akan Highlife music. In the songs examined religious ideas are repeatedly expressed. The name of God is continuously invoked in order that he should protect or help those who are in need. Furthermore, as I pointed out earlier, Highlife songs about death have clearly been written also for funeral celebrations. The socially important funerals constitute an attractive commercial objective for Highlife musicians. In view of this fact it is remarkable that the songs contain so little real comfort for the bereaved but rather emphasize disgust, repugnance, and extreme sadness. These are the emotions that singers consider best suited for funerals. Despair, disgust, grief, and boisterous drunkenness typify the Akan funeral rather than words of consolation and resignation (cf. Bleek 1975; pp. 57-63, 67-69; 1976). It cannot be doubted, therefore, that the absence of phrases about a life hereafter is deliberate.

A possible second objection to my line of reasoning is that I am comparing the Highlife texts with a too dogmatic and monolithic representation of traditional thinking about death. The traditional world view is likely to have been much more inconsistent and contradictory. This objection is very real. The question that interests us here, however, is not so much what the official traditional philosophy of death was but rather what people actually think and expect with regard to death. It seems plausible that popular song texts would better reflect the ideas and expectations of common people than would doctrines that are quoted by experts in the tradition.

In this context we must discuss two further questions connected with the study of Akan reactions to death. The first is whether death is regarded as a natural or an unnatural phenomenon. The second question is how Akan people survive the fear of death if denial does not take place and resistance brings so little result. The discussion about the natural or unnatural character of death dates back to the beginning of this century, to the writings of such people as Hertz (1960; pp. 77-8) Frazer (1913; pp. 33-58), and Radin (1927). It has already been pointed out that in the Highlife songs death is regarded as an inevitable event. To some extent one could say, therefore, that death is regarded as natural, but there are three restrictions. In the first place recognition of its naturalness does not imply acceptance or resignation with regard to death. The songs demonstrate a clear repugnance to the event of death. Second, a premature death is regarded as much less natural. In the natural

course of events a child buries its mother. A reversal of this order is shocking and requires an explanation as to who caused the death. It looks tempting to suggest that the fact that a death is explained as being caused by evil mystical powers can be taken as an indication that death is not regarded as natural, but this is not altogether true. Even when a person dies at an old age, rumors that evil powers caused his death are bound to occur,<sup>11</sup> not necessarily because people believe that the death is “unnatural” but because accusing an evil person or supernatural powers makes the protest against death more real and provides the living with a more tangible belief that they can defend themselves against death. Furthermore, a funeral needs to be shocking and dramatic and, without doubt, such accusations do heighten the emotions during a funeral. Third, some social enemies are waiting for an occasion to hurl suspicions and accusations at each other. The death of an old man may provide such an occasion, although no one denies that it is natural for old people to die. These remarks are, however, no longer based upon Highlife texts but upon field work experience. It is my impression that the deaths of both old and young people give rise to witchcraft accusations. This impression needs to be investigated further.

The most crucial question to ask is how Akan people manage to organize their lives if they have constantly to face the reality of death. For if death is not denied and resistance to death does not prevent death from continuing to take its toll, it seems justifiable to speak of “constantly facing the reality of death.” My proposition is that the threatening reality of death is reduced and brought under control by the collective dramatization of facing death. During funerals the living are, as it were, saturated by the fear of death. The saturation brings about a situation of stupor and anaesthesia: it makes people numb with regard to the menace of death and death is gradually forgotten. The escape from the fear of death has a “homeopathic” character. As a person looking straight into the light of the sun will end up not seeing the sun, in a similar way someone loses sight of death by looking at it in the face. Death is not denied by creating life after death, but one might perhaps say that denial, or rather oblivion, takes place in the recognition of death.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion we can say that death is a recurrent theme in Akan Highlife songs. Out of the one hundred songs analysed thirty-one



mentioned death in one way or the other. Examining the texts on death, I found to my surprise that the absolute and definite reality of death is never denied. Death's sting is never taken away by pointing out that death is only a journey to another life, a transition, or a temporary event or that life is eternal or that the human soul is immortal. No reference is made to three belief elements that are frequently quoted by experts on the Akan traditional world view and that deny death's ultimate threat. These elements are the belief in ancestors, the belief in reincarnation, and the belief in retribution after death. Neither is any influence from the Christian doctrine about death noticed, although almost half of the Ghanaians say that they belong to a Christian church. Death is depicted as a gruesome reality, from which no one can escape and from which no one returns. Death itself is a punishment, but after death nothing further happens. The terror of death is particularly vividly depicted in the death of a mother or a beloved. The death of a father, on the other hand, seems to cause financial rather than emotional problems.

This inventory of death themes in Highlife songs could create the impression that people are more worried about the deaths of their beloveds than about their own deaths. I am not convinced that this is true. I would rather suggest the hypothesis that people project the fear of their own deaths onto the fear of other people's deaths. People mourning for others are in fact mourning for themselves.

A crucial final question is how are people able to live if they have no means of forgetting the chilling reality of death. My tentative answer is that death is "forgotten" by facing it to the extreme point of drunkenness, hallucination, and emotional exhaustion. I have tried to make this possibility clear through a comparison: by looking straight into the sun a person will end up seeing the sun no more.<sup>12</sup> The presence of death is suppressed not by denying it but by recognizing it fully and concentrating on it. The view that thinking about death can imply forgetting death has also been proposed by the Dutch philosopher Verhoeven (1966; p. 281) who writes "One thinks of death in general in order not to think of one's own death." Quoting a western philosopher in this context is not a digression. I want to emphasize that the Akan are not unique in their emphatic recognition of the finality of death. In the western world the public recognition of death has made rapid progress under such philosophers as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre and seems to be widespread now among common people.

A final, methodological question that may be raised is whether

an analysis of a number of Highlife songs can provide us with a reliable picture of human beliefs. As I pointed out in the introduction, my assumption is that popular art expressions much more than either elitist art or traditional art, which serves artistic and religious purposes, should be regarded as significant reflections of what ordinary people think, wish, and fear.

## NOTES

1. Many people have been involved in the collection, transcription, and translation of Highlife songs. I am particularly indebted to Kwasi Asant Darko, Samuel Asamoah, Kwasi Anim, Boakye Danquah, Margaret-Hall Badoo, Veronica Ampofo, Kofi Asiedu, and Gifty Anin. I am further grateful to Thomas Crump who corrected the first version of this paper

2. Moore's (1968; p. 57) paper "rests on the belief that traditional oral poetry from many parts of Africa exhibits a number of common themes in the imagery with which it handles the fact of death." I think that anthropologists are rather struck by the divergent reactions to death in various African communities (see Lienhardt 1970).

3. Highlife is also played in Nigeria and some other countries. I am here concerned only with Ghanaian Highlife, which is predominantly in the Akan language.

4. Those plays are usually called *concert* (also in the vernacular). Bame (1975) names them *concert party plays* and Collins (1976a) *comic operas*. Even when tragic events are depicted, the comic element never disappears (Bame, personal communication). Ricard (1974) describes the concert party in Lomé, Togo.

5. These songs have been listed in the Appendix.

6. According to some this proverb has a more "technical" meaning, namely that in the matrilineal descent system the family depends on the mother for its continuation.

7. A hook-shaped stick used for cutting grass.

8. *Shepherd* refers to the heir who is supposed to take over the mother's responsibilities. Many songs emphasize that heirs do not really care for the children who are given to them.

9. *Kente* is an expensive, locally made cloth consisting of a number of narrow stripes of colorful cotton cloth sewn together.

10. This factor of the Christian denial of death has been neglected in Ariès' (1974) treatise on the "tamed death" in the early middle ages of Europe.

11. As a contrast, Pouillon (1975; p. 83) writes that among the Dangleat of Tschad "La morte d'un vieillard est normal et on ne s'en inquiète pas, celle d'un jeune ou d'un adulte ne l'est pas et on cherche à l'expliquer."

12. After completing this paper I came across the following motto from La Rochefoucauld (1630-1680) in Hinton's *Dying* (1967): "Neither the sun nor death can be looked at with a steady eye."

*Appendix*: Highlife songs in which the theme of death is mentioned.

<i>Title of song</i>	<i>Name of band</i>
1. "Obi abayewa" [Someone's daughter]	African Brothers (led by Ampadu)
2. "Agyanka due" [Orphan, condolences]	Okukuseku No. 2 Band (led by Kofi Sammy)
3. "Gyae su" [Stop crying]	African Brothers
4. "Aku sika" [Golden Aku]	African Brothers
5. "Onnibie asem ye mmobo" [A poor person is miserable]	Gay Brothers Band
6. "Hini me" [Open the gate for me]	African Brothers
7. "Onipa nse hwee" [Man is nothing]	African Brothers
8. "Yaa Boahemaa"	All Brothers
9. "Maame Adwoa" [Mother Adwoa]	African Brothers
10. "Ofie Nwansena" [Housefly]	African Brothers
11. "Owuo yi ye ya" [This death is painful]	African Brothers
12. "Ade aye me" [I am in trouble]	African Brothers
13. "Ennye nne" [Not today]	C. K. Mann and his Carroset 7
14. "M'adamfo pa" [My good friend]	The Parrots (led by Ani Johnson)
15. "Owuo" [Death]	Konadu's Band
16. "Oheneba" [Chief's Child]	Teacher and his Africana
17. "Aboa a onni dua" [Animal without tail]	African Brothers
18. "Obere biara twa owuo" [All hard work ends up in death]	African Brothers

- |  |                                   |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| 19. "Aka me nkoaa"<br>[I am left alone]                        | African Brothers                  |
| 20. "Nea obiara pe"<br>[Let everyone do what he wants]         | African Brothers                  |
| 21. "Sika anibere"<br>[Lust for money]                         | African Brothers                  |
| 22. "Owuo mpe sika"<br>[Death does not like money]             | Konadu                            |
| 23. "Onipa wu a na wawu"<br>[If someone dies, he is dead]      | Konadu                            |
| 24. "Asaase asa"<br>[Name]                                     | Konadu                            |
| 25. "Asem bi adi bone"<br>[Something serious has happened]     | Konadu                            |
| 26. "Adamfo pa"<br>[Good friend]                               | Konadu                            |
| 27. "Agya Kwakye"<br>[Father Kwakye]                           | Konadu                            |
| 28. "Awisiaa"<br>[Orphan]                                      | Nananom                           |
| 29. "Agyanka"<br>[Orphan]                                      | Nananom                           |
| 30. "Yebewu nti yenna"<br>[Should we not sleep because we die] | African Brothers                  |
| 31. "Merebre"<br>[I am suffering]                              | Pat Thomas and<br>the Sweet Beans |

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#### POSTSCRIPT

The content of this paper has provided stuff for discussions with a number of people. An obvious question, which frequently arose, was whether there are really no Highlife songs which constitute a denial of death. It seems appropriate to mention two texts which were given to me and did indeed contain some reference to reincarnation. At the same time, however, I must state that these "exceptions" are no reason for me to change the view expressed in the paper.

Both texts are taken from songs by Ampadu's "African Brothers' Band." In a song, entitled *Akwankaa tea*, Ampadu describes the difficulties of a poor man and quotes him: "I do not think that I will become rich before I die. If I ever become rich, it will be after I have died and come back." In *Kofi Nkrabea* Ampadu ends the song with the following—somewhat enigmatic—remark: "As for my suffering in this world, when I come to die and go to the ghost world, I alone shall know whether I will return to this world."