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Situational Analysis on funeral rites and practices in Ghana



This is what I like because when they always do that it always make the person who wife or husband that had die forget about the past and laugh and will always be happy.

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For the Widows and Orphans Movement
(WOM) and OXFAM in Ghana

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WOM EQUITY IN ACTION VOLUNTEER COOPERATION PROGRAM (VCP)

-Baseline Survey Report-

626 participants engaged,
383 adults
248 children
in **4** communities of
2 district assemblies

1. BACKGROUND/RATIONALE FOR FUNERAL RITES

Funeral rites are indispensable in traditional societies that uphold relational ways of living as it pertains to different societies in northern Ghana. In the worldview of these societies, a community of persons does not comprise only persons presently living, but also-and crucially- includes ancestors who are believed to reside in a metaphysical realm. Thus, when a person dies, it is an imperative to perform rites for the deceased to enable him/her to join the realm of the ancestors. An essential feature of these rites is the process of mourning that widows/widowers and orphans have to go through.

Among the Grune speaking people of Gamborono and Namoo (in the Bongo district) and Dasabligo and Nkunzeisi (in the Nabdam district), where this baseline study was carried out, they believe that the funeral rites which have been handed over through the generations are performed to bid farewell and usher the departed relatives into the next life. And that, without the rites the spirit of the deceased will not rest and equally not be able to enter into ancestorhood. It was also indicated by these communities that apart from transitioning the departed relatives into the afterlife, the funeral rites also purify and bestow wellbeing in the form of prosperity and health on the family members the deceased leaves behind.

Some mundane accounts were given for how funeral rites and the different aspects came about. For instance, in explaining the integral role of food in the performance of the funerals, a folklore told by the elders of Gamborone community revealed that when an affluent man once lost a relative, a poor neighbour suggested to the rich man to perform the funeral of the relative such that there would be plenty food to feed the poor people in the community. Hence for them, an

aspect of the funeral rites which they refer to as *Borogo* is that it serves as a means to feed the hungry and poor, which explains why there is usually food in abundance throughout the duration of the performance of the rites. It could also be deduced from the folklore that since the funerals are often held during the hot/dry season between February and April, when sometimes famine occurs, the funerals provide opportunities for community members to share meals.

Apart from the availability of food, the rites of passage into the next life are accompanied by performative arts in the form of music and dance. These provide a source of entertainment for many, especially children in the communities.

2. IMPORTANT FEATURES OF BURIAL/FUNERAL RITES

In describing the processes and rituals performed during funerals across the four communities of this study, some salient common features emerged. These include:

Age

The age of the bereaved man or woman does not matter in the performance of the funeral. Irrespective of the age, young or old, the forms of the funeral rites remain the same.

Duration

A common feature in the funeral rites in all the four communities is the duration performance of the final funeral rites of mourning usually takes three days for men and four days for women. In some instances, it takes seven days for the women to undergo the full funeral rites. In most cases, the burial rites would usually take three days for both men and women. Sometimes the final funeral rites occur soon after the burial of the deceased; however, for most households the final funeral rites tend to be performed a year or years later after the burial.

There are a few variations of the duration depending not on gender but solely on the status of the family-either as settler or indigene- in the community as found in Namoo and Nkuzuensi. In these communities, while it takes three days to perform the funeral rites for an indigene it takes four days for a settler.

Bathing and purification with herbs

The process of purification of the widow/widower is usually entrusted to an elderly widow or widower who has no intention of marrying again. To start with, an elderly widower would shave off the hair of the widow. When bereaved, the hair is deemed to be a bad omen, and that's why it's shaven off completely.

After the haircut, the widow is then bathed with a grounded (powdered) salty herbal concoction fetched from the traditional priest or spiritual leader of the town. This concoction is made from the costume of leaves worn by a previous widow during the funeral rite performance of a relative. These leaves which are often from the shea tree are burnt and made into concoctions, adding salt. In some communities they do not use the burnt/black herbal medicine but rather resort to using a grounded herbal mixture made of roots and thus has a brownish/wine colour.

For the men (widowers) they are not shaved, although interestingly, in communities like Namoo, the widowed men are bathed by the qualified elderly widows who bath the women during funerals. Nonetheless, whether it's widowed man or woman, s/he is bathed outside the house, in the open air and any passersby can see what's going on.

Following the bath, the widow would then be sent indoors for some further cleansing rituals, notably sprinkling of ash in the rooms and kitchen of the house a gesture which is believed to ward off the ghost of the deceased partner from visiting his wife.

Solitary confinement

The widow or widower is kept in solitary confinement for the entire duration-three or four days- of the funeral ceremony. It is only at the end of the confinement that s/he can bath again.

While in solitary confinement, the widow sits naked on leaves or in some cases where the practice has been modified, she sits on an animal's hide (skin) with the private parts covered with a threaded costume. She sleeps on the same animal skin during the period of confinement. And during the confinement, she is attended to by the elderly widow. From time to time, some elderly women, preferably widowed, would be permitted to briefly converse with and console the widow.



A piece of threaded cloth that is used to cover the private parts these days.

As the widow goes through mourning in silence and introspection, she is made to hold household items such as calabash, pot, earthenware pot, sieve, with some slight variations depending on the community. In respect of the men (widowers) who do not have to be naked during the period of confinement, they are made to hold arrows and other tools associated with war, considering not only the seriousness of the rituals, but also the historical antecedents of warfare in these communities.

A common practice among the communities is that during the period of confinement, should the widow, while sitting in the room on the leafy mat or hide, be bitten by an ant, it portends a serious problem that needs to be addressed. When it happens like that, it means that a serious family issue needs to be addressed, or the widow has to make a confession and admission of guilt- for instance of infidelity- with regards to her relationship with the deceased. It is believed that should the widow fail to confess to whatever grievous problem there is, the burning fire of straws used for the rites will go off.

Food and drinks

As indicated earlier, the burial/funeral rites are characterized by availability of food and meat for members of the household and visitors. Animals meant for the rites such as goats, guinea fowls, chicken, sheep and/or cattle- depending on what the family can afford- are slaughtered and skinned during the night of the wake keeping. The meat is prepared and shared the following morning when the rites formally start.

For the widows, a portion of the medicine which is used to bath them is given to them to drink as a means of cleansing them from the dead. It is believed that the widows who refuse to drink the concoction will fall ill.

In most instances, the widow drinks and eats every meal such as *Tuo Zaafi*, *Zonkom*, *pito* (normally consumed on the final day) etc., throughout the period from one and the same calabash which she holds during the period. This calabash is usually smeared with some of the herbal concoction or shea butter. Other communities use or include an earthenware bowl from which the widow eats. It is believed that the calabash and earthenware bowl symbolically represent the widow's deceased husband.



A gathering of women at Dasibligo to share their experiences of funeral rites with WOM staff

Treatment of orphans

Typically, the first and last born of the deceased's children are made to wear a rope on the neck and shave their hair off to show that they are orphans. However, in some cases, children can offer tobacco or a small sum of money as compensation for not getting their hair shaven.

In terms of the meat for the rites, it is a prerequisite that the orphans be the first to have their share of meat before anyone else. One common practice pertaining to food was that orphans are required to eat Tuo Zaafi (TZ) which is left over the night in the open and uncovered. The bowl which contains the TZ is placed on top of the bowl with soup, such that the TZ is left open at the mercy of the weather, dust and flies.

3. KEY FINDINGS

Through the active deliberations from different participating groups in the four communities, this study identified some key findings worthy of consideration. These findings are largely about the impacts or effects of the funeral rites and changes the communities envisage to occur.

Impacts/Effects on Widows

“When I was going through the widowhood rites after my husband passed away,” recalled a widow, “I felt sad. And I felt abandoned.”

“When my husband was alive” said another woman, “I never had to go through these rites. There was no way he would have permitted shaving off my hair completely.”

These statements aptly express the sentiments of the majority of participants who were widows. Although some women, a smaller number- reported of benefits of mourning through the processes of the rites, especially during the ash cleansing exercise, many widows expressed negative emotions about their experiences.

A woman who spoke of being traumatized while undergoing widowhood rites stated, “I get heart palpitations from time to time and this started after I was shouted at when I was going through the widowhood rites for the funeral of my late husband.”

For many widows who participated in the study, they felt dehumanised especially when they were bathed in the open for people to see them naked amidst incessant shouting and clapping. In one instance at Gamborono only one, out of 30 widows did not feel anything positive about the rites and argued that there was no need to maintain such funeral rituals which in their views were demeaning. The dissenting voice was from an elderly widow of about 75 years old who felt and insisted that the widowhood rites were integral to their tradition, and it was necessary to honour their ancestors by maintaining it.

The women participants who are not widows also expressed their discomfort at the thought of having to go through the burial and funeral rituals, considering what they have been observing since they were children.

“I shiver when I see other women go through the rites and I think of a similar fate awaiting me when my husband is no more,” said one participant.

In the words of another woman, “It’s quite unbearable when I start to think about the changes I’ll have to experience after the demise of my partner. I especially wonder about who is going to help me care for my children.”

The psychological effects notwithstanding, the funeral rites also bring about debilitating economic impacts, notably the loss of property (she might have had with the deceased spouse) and drastic reduction to access to land for the widow in view of the patrilineal and inherent patriarchal structure of these communities. In addition, the high cost of performing funerals which are increasingly becoming competitive, ultimately renders the widow and the family members poorer after the funeral. In terms of burial, the cost of items such as cloth and mat used to bury the deceased husband are borne by the widow. Other expenses include buying of guinea fowl for the widower who shaves her hair, and of late bearing the cost of food and drinks for one’s guest at such funeral performances.

Other adverse impacts of the funeral rites on widows include:

- The **disrespect of widows**, due among other things to the fact that their haircut and bathing is often done in the full glare of the public at the refuse dump whereby spectators tend to shout at them and make mockery of the shape of their heads.
- Similarly, widows feel dehumanised when food is cooked on the refuse dump and they are made to eat there, during the final stages of the funeral rites.
- **Unjust treatment** can emanate from the arbitrary exercise of power, particularly from false accusations and coercions when an ant bites a widow during the period of confinement.
- A **portion of the calabash** which the widow holds is **broken** to indicate that the widow has had an affair with a man before the final funeral rites. The size of the broken calabash depends on the number of times that the widow must have had an affair. These

women are also made to enter the house through the backdoor as they are forbidden to enter using the main entrance. They feel embarrassed by all these punitive actions.

- Widows who refuse to remarry (in most cases a brother of the deceased husband) sometimes experience **abuse** in the form of beating, insults, abandonment. As a result, sometimes the final funeral rites are deliberately delayed by the men of the house. Should such widows, especially in the case of younger women, decide to move on with their lives, they may **not be able to cater well for their children** who will be mandated to stay in the household under the care of relatives of their father who usually don't take good care of such orphaned children.

Impact on Orphans

An essential component of this baseline study was the incorporation of the voices of younger people living in these communities in terms of their views about the funeral rites. In each of the four communities, Junior High School pupils were engaged. Among these pupils were orphans who although did not directly identify as such, were able to express their feelings about the funeral rites.



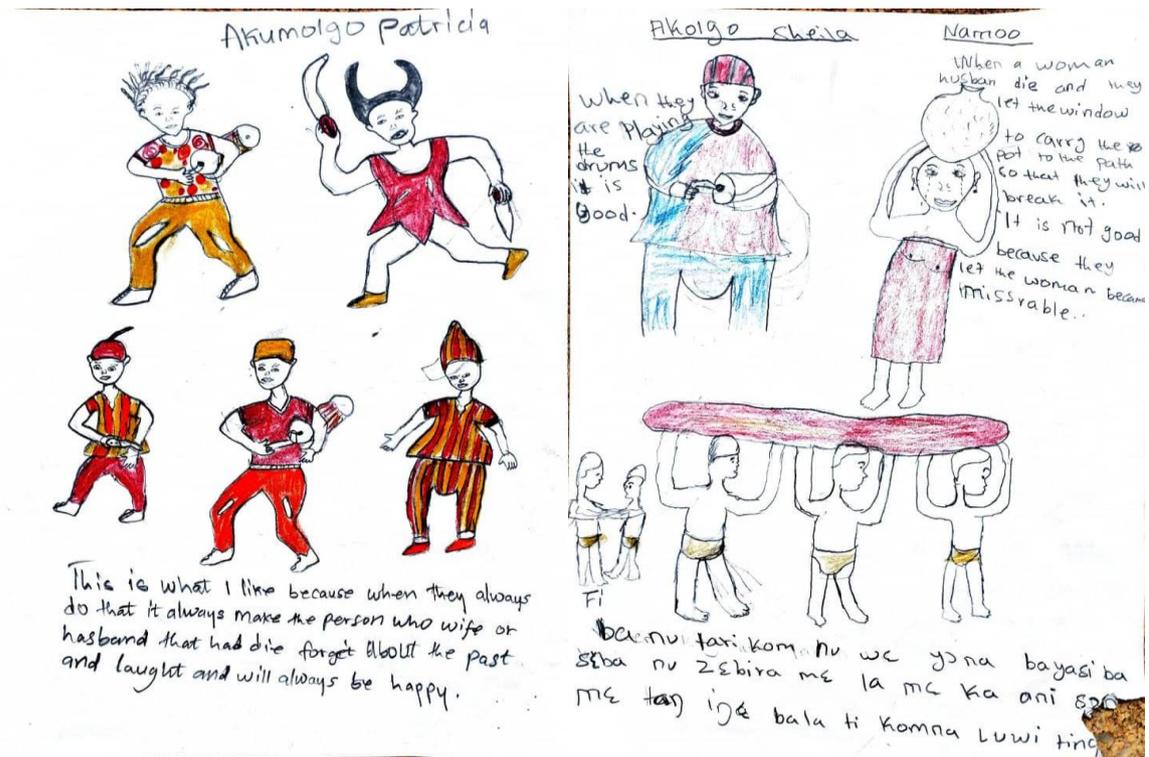
Engagement with pupils at Gaborone Junior High School.

Some school children indicated that they like certain aspects of the funeral ceremonies, such as availability of food, war dance and musical performances. For some boys, it is the fact that they inherit their deceased fathers which is demonstrated by their assistance in carrying the corpse for burial. In spite of these positive aspects, the pupils shared experiences and knowledge of more negative effects of the funeral rites in their respective communities. These negative aspects include:

01. Unhygienic practices- Often times, in situations where the final funeral rites have to occur during the burial, the corpse has to be embalmed and kept for the duration of the ritual performances. But keeping a dead body for about three or more days in a household could be unhygienic and a threat to the health of people. As stated by one pupil, “I don’t like the fact that they keep the body of the deceased for long before burial. This makes the body stink.”

Another unhygienic practice is when in some instances the men who bury the dead are required to mix the bath water from the corpse with food for human consumption.

And as mentioned earlier, during the process of mourning, the orphans are woken at dawn to eat uncovered T.Z that was prepared the previous night. Orphans are mandated to eat the T.Z. irrespective of the potential dangers of its exposure to toxins.



Selected artworks by school children portraying their views about the funeral rites

02. *Functions by boys and girls*- In case an experienced male funeral performer should die, it is customary to initiate his elderly son as a replacement for the community. This is normally done without any regard to the age of the son who to start with, will be required to enter a grave to bury his own father.

With reference to orphaned teenage girls, they are required by some communities to undress the upper body and their breasts become exposed as they walk to cross a designated road to perform a ritual of breaking bowls into pieces, a gesture of mourning.

03. Economic burden: Reports were made of instances of legacy debts passed on to children who upon the demise of a parent discover that the parent had committed to settling certain indebtedness, including some promises to ritualists etc. Such commitments become a burden on the children, sometimes in addition to the burden of contributing towards the funeral.

“When my father was alive, he had nothing. When he died the family asked a small boy like me to buy a cow for them to perform his funeral rites. Where was I going to a cow from?” bemoaned a 12-year-old JHS boy.

There were some accounts of orphans entrapped in abject poverty following the demise of parents, especially fathers. Consequently, basic necessities such as feeding become a problem and due to lack of financial resources, some children drop out of school to travel to cities in the southern part of the country to work and fend for themselves.

04. Traumatic/unpleasant experiences: “I don’t like the way the body of the dead is handled,” declared a boy who lost his mother, “the people who carried the body of my mother, mishandled it. To the extent that they would throw it back and forth. And at a point they threw my mother’s body and started fighting among themselves. This saddened me greatly.”

Another source of a frightening experience is when in some communities, adults, as part of the funeral rites have to walk in a circle around the orphans who sit on the floor. As they walk around the orphans, they utter incantations. “The words from the chants are traumatising and it gave me nightmares,” a pupil revealed.

Also, unlike adults who these days can opt out of the funeral ritual, children are compelled to undergo the funeral rites irrespective of the religious creed that they profess.

Some notable changes

In the focus group discussions with the elders of these four communities, it came to light that there have been some significant changes and innovations to the funeral performance rituals over the past 20 years. This was particularly so for Namoo where among other things, the widows are now bathed in an enclosed space outside, are made to sit on mats instead of hides while in isolation, with a cloth wrapped around her body, covering her breasts downwards.



The chief and elders of Namoo

In all the communities, it was revealed that there is an emerging trend whereby some widows decline to perform the traditional funeral rites due to their religious persuasions, particularly Christians and Muslims. Nonetheless, the belief that widows who refuse to perform the funeral rites will fall ill and not recover still persists in the communities.

Although the overarching view from the group discussions especially by the widows and married women was geared towards abolishing the widowhood rites because of aspects they deem dehumanizing, there general consensus was that there was the need reform and make changes to the rites. Some changed envisaged by participants are:

- i. Widows should not be bathed outside in the open, but the bathing should take place inside a bathroom in the house.
- ii. Shaving of the hairs of widows and orphans ought to stop.
- iii. The practice of orphaned boys compelled to carry the corpse for burial must end.
- iv. Orphaned teenage girls should be permitted to wear dresses for the aspect of the ritual where they are made to walk bare chested to break bowls.

4. CONCLUSION: LEARNING FORWARD

This study identified the need of community members, as clearly articulated by widows, married women and children for ending the widowhood rites of funerals or at the least some changes should be made to them. In this vein, it would be useful to do some further work to ascertain for instance what possible consequences there could be for not performing funeral rites.

It is also recommended that in communities such as Namoo and Dasabligo where some important modifications to the funeral/widowhood rites have occurred over the past couple of years, other communities should be encouraged to understudy such changes through community exchange learning initiatives for the ritual performers, elders and other key stakeholders.

ANNEX

Gender disaggregated data for people reached.

Name of community	Adult Males	Adult Females	Children males	Children females	Total
NKUNZIESI	46	82	22	26	176
NAMOON	28	88	21	38	175
DASABLIGO	38	37	31	40	146
GAMBRONGO	16	50	33	30	129

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