

Death and mourning in Ghana: How gender shapes the rituals of the Akan people

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Funerals are a major part of Akan culture. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Gender has a significant impact on the socio-economic, political and religious experiences of Ghanaians. For [Akan](#), the country's largest ethnic group, descent is traced through the [maternal line](#). Property is transferred in this line too.

[Mourning rituals](#) are another area of life that's shaped by gender in Ghana—as in many other cultures of the world.

In a [recent paper](#), we explored the way Akan mourning rituals reflect the culture's ideas about gender and reproduce social patterns.

Bereavement is gendered in Akan society: there are strict behavioral prescriptions for males and females. We argue that enacting and reproducing masculinity and femininity in these rituals may have negative health and psychological consequences for both men and women.

Our study is useful for therapists and counselors to understand the impact of gender and culture when working with people who are dealing with grief and loss. Gender shapes how people make meaning of—and cope with—grief and loss in a specific social milieu.

Mourning, masculinity and femininity

The responsibilities of the principal cultural players of Akan death and mourning rituals are assigned according to gender. Males are the major players in organizing and supervising the rites.

A key player is the lineage head (Abusuapanin), who is invariably male.

In Akan culture, the lineage head must be informed of all deaths occurring in the lineage. He must, in turn, inform the chief and other authorities of the polity (village or town) of all deaths in his lineage when they occur.

The second major player is the chief mourner, who is also usually a male. According to the customs and traditions of the Akan (and the [law courts](#)), the body of a deceased person belongs to the extended family into which one is born. The extended family decides at a meeting who the chief mourner should be.

The choice of chief mourner is very important because he makes decisions such as who will succeed the deceased and how to mourn fittingly. He oversees the proper organization and execution of all rites pertaining to the death, particularly ensuring that the deceased has a funeral that befits his or her status attained in life and is compatible with the social standing of the family in the community.

Women's roles in Akan mourning rites, though extensive, are secondary to those of men. Women have the responsibility to bathe and prepare the dead body to be laid in state for mourners to file past it. These women are usually members of the deceased's family and are well versed in handling dead bodies.

Women also fulfill the role of professional mourners or wailers. Some Akan lineages engage the services of these wailers to add solemnity to the mortuary rites. At ordinary Akan funerals where they are absent, it is the women who lament and wail during critical stages of the process. Men are culturally discouraged from loud wailing and weeping. The expression *ɔbarima nsu*, which means "a man does/must not cry," calls on Akan men to refrain from such behavior to avoid labels of effeminacy.

This norm in the mourning process is consistent with a cultural practice that generally demands that Akan men must not [publicly](#) display their emotions, even in the face of adversity, pain and suffering.

In contrast, a woman who does not weep or lament at the death of a close relative is suspected of being a malevolent witch responsible for the deceased's death. Thus, the Akan mourning rituals can be culturally and psychologically coercive and oppressive for women.

Cash donations have become an important part of Ghanaian funerals. Both men and women make donations. But the archetype is that men will

donate large sums of money to the bereaved family while women announce the donations and heap appellations on the male donors. For example, the compliments that women lavish on men to acknowledge their cash or kind donations may include mo opeafo (well done), mompene no na oye obarima amu (let all praise him for he is a real man indeed) and other special names such as odenoho (the affluent or independent one).

The male donor, female announcer gender hierarchy at funerals is another instance of gender role (re)enactment and performance. When men demonstrate economic prowess at funerals and women remain on the fringes as announcers, they are both performing and reinforcing a culturally given [gender](#) hierarchy.

The burden of mourning for males and females

We concluded from our findings that Akan death and mourning rituals can be culturally and psychologically oppressive against men and women. In the case of [women](#), this is due to the unfair power hierarchy and the patriarchal nature of Ghanaian society.

In the case of men, the cultural expectation that they be emotionally restrained in mourning may have health and psychological consequences. These could [include](#) depression, stress and suicide. The masculine requirement for men to resist crying during bereavement leaves men to suffer alone in silence when they experience emotional pain.

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