

# COVID-19 and its Disruption of Funeral Rituals in Africa: The Ghanaian Experience

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## Abstract

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide affected the socio-cultural life of the African. One major socio-cultural ritual that was heavily affected was the celebration of funeral rituals. Funerals in Africa are not only social ceremonies but religious as well. The community uses it to send off the departed to the spiritual world. However, the advent of the COVID-19 affected the performance of funeral rituals in Africa. The paper discusses the impact of the disruption using the experience in Ghana and the responses of the various communities in Ghana had to respond to the regulations put in place by the government to regulate funerals and other indigenous religious rituals. Employing the phenomenological method, the paper analyses data collected from the field and the literature to assess the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 on the celebration of funeral rituals in Ghana. Findings from the study indicates that COVID-19 disrupted the celebrations of festivals in Ghana.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 • Funeral • Rituals • Culture • Ghana

## Introduction

Funeral celebrations in Africa are not just a social event but also a religious one as well. Funeral celebrations are used by the societies of Africa to see off their dead to the ancestral world. They mark the end of the rites of passage [1]. Funerals have been used by Africans to celebrate the life of their love ones who have transited to the spiritual world and it is believed that failure to perform the full burial rites of a family member may deny him or her access to the ancestral home. Every society in Africa has its unique way of seeing off their dead to the ancestral world. One unique feature of funeral rites in Africa is its socialisation importance. Funerals have the propensity to bring people from all works of life far and near together to celebrate the life of the dead. Funeral celebrations in Africa are symbolic involving a lot of rituals. These rituals include the offering of food to the ancestral spirits accompanied with drumming and dancing to accompany the dead on their journey to the ancestral world [2].

The celebration of funerals suffered a jolt when the novel corona virus struck the world and spread quickly around the globe. Governments in Africa put in place measures to curtail the rapid spread of the virus in their communities. In Ghana, the first two cases of the virus were detected on 15 March 2020 from two travelers who had arrived in the country from Turkey and Norway. The government of Ghana in order to control and curb the spread of the virus announced a set of restrictions in the country. This paper discusses the impact of the restrictions imposed by the government of Ghana

on public gatherings including funerals. The paper employing the phenomenological method makes use of both the primary and secondary data to find out how the restrictions on public gatherings imposed by the government affected the celebration of funerals in Ghana. The primary sources of information were mainly obtained from oral interviews conducted in Cape Coast and its vicinity. The secondary sources, were comprised of books, newspaper and journal articles, and internet sources that dealt with the issues under consideration.

## COVID-19 in Ghana

In December 2019, the Chinese authorities in Wuhan province reported of the emergence of the novel Corona virus infections among the residents [3]. The World Health Organisation (WHO) in March 2020 declared COVID-19 a global pandemic as the virus had spread to more than 100 countries with about 4000 fatalities. The virus is primarily spread through contact with small droplets produced from coughing, sneezing, or talking by an infected person. In March 2020, Ghana reported its first two cases of the virus. Two travelers from Turkey and Norway were diagnosed with the virus when they arrived at the Kotoka international airport. The virus rapidly spread throughout the country [4]. On 15 March 2020, the president of Ghana, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo Addo, in his second address to the nation on the outbreak of the COVID-19 in the country, announced a set of policies to curb the spread of the virus in the

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country. The president in the interest of public safety and protection of the population stated that:

All public gatherings, including conferences, workshops, funerals (italicises mine), festivals, political rallies, sporting events and religious activities, such as services in churches and mosques, have been suspended for the next four (4) weeks. Private burials are permitted, but with limited numbers, not exceeding twenty-five (25) in attendance [5].

As the case count continued to mount, the president of Ghana on 30 March 2020, imposed a lockdown on the Greater Accra and Greater Kumasi areas of the country. The lockdown was enabled by the enactment of the imposition of restriction act, (Act 1012) by the parliament of Ghana. The restriction ordered all persons in the restricted areas to stay at home as much as possible for the next two weeks. People could only go out in these places only to get essential things such as food, medicine, and water or to visit the banks and public toilets [6].

The President eased the restrictions by removing the lockdown imposed on the Greater Accra and Greater Kumasi Areas. While lifting the partial lockdown, the ban on public gathering such as funeral observance was not removed. Ghana has so far witnessed three waves of the virus with the delta variant being responsible for pushing up the numbers. The president of Ghana in a broadcast said:

It appears that our nation like many others is experiencing a third wave of COVID-19 infections. These increased infections have largely been driven by the delta variant of the virus [7].

The COVID-19 situation in Ghana has not completely abated even though the rate of infection has dropped. As at January 26, 2022, Ghana has a count case of 156,272 infections with 1,382 coronavirus related deaths. One reason that has accounted for the low case count is the high vaccine acceptance rate among the populace. Over a million doses of vaccine have been administered with plans by the Ghana Health Service to begin a role out of a booster vaccine.

An important feature at the inception of COVID-19 in Ghana was the role myths and misconceptions played in the responses of the people towards the virus. In a study by Tabong and Segtub the authors reported of some myths and misconceptions that confronted the fight against the virus. One myth was the fact that the virus could not survive in a hot climate like that of Ghana. There was also the idea that older persons were more susceptible to the disease than younger persons which made some younger persons felt reluctant to adhere to the COVID protocols. These misconceptions and others were fueled by the use of social media. The government through its agencies and NGOs such as the nuns from the sisters' of mary mother of the church, have managed to counter these misconceptions. Sister hometome says the catholic nuns in Ghana have decided to launch the campaign to promote COVID-19 vaccination in the face of the resistance and fears of many people to receive the vaccine, despite the government's efforts to ensure sufficient doses for all [8].

## Funeral rituals in Ghana

Funeral celebrations in Ghana are both social and religious in nature. Funeral celebrations according to Rattray "help to separate

the dead from the living, to sever the ties with this world, and to assist the newly dead to pick up again the threads linking him or her with the land of spirits, which had been cut or dropped at puberty." A respondent corroborates the views expressed by Rattray thus:

In my opinion, funeral celebration is a rite of passage which when done helps the deceased to move on from this world to another world. It gives the deceased the opportunity to go the world of the dead [9].

**Another respondent says:** We believe that we make the spirit of the dead happy when these rites are performed. These rites are performed so that the spirit of the dead wouldn't be hovering around and live among the living [10].

Funerals are also a communal affair as members of the bereaved family are joined by members of the community and friends from elsewhere to mourn the departed. Another respondent gave the communal nature of funeral thus:

Funeral celebrations bring families together because, during funerals, people from far and near come together and get to meet their relatives. It also brings unity. Secondly it helps preserve our culture [11].

**Another respondent had this to say:** In terms of funeral celebration to the Ghanaian society or to Ghanaian culture, it helps in giving memory, remembering the past of the one who once live. It also brings people together because, at times, there are people who have traveled far from home. They come, sit and planned the future of the family. Secondly, they think of a successor who would take over the deceased and how to plan and share his property. It also helps in giving the person a proper burial [12].

Funeral celebrations in Ghana are either small or big depending on the social standing of the dead. If the dead person is a commoner or someone of low social standing, his or her funeral may attract the immediate family and some few sympathisers. If the dead is however, of high social standing, the funeral celebration may attract a large gathering of mourners. Funeral celebrations in Ghana have gone through many changes. From the situation where the family will prefer that their family member died at home and be buried the next day with a funeral ceremony held seven days later to the situation today where the family will hold on and perform an elaborate funeral ceremony for their departed member [13]. Funeral rituals in Ghana are divided into two main segments, *nawotwe da* (week day celebration) and *ayie da* (funeral day).

## Literature Review

### Nnawotwe da (week day celebration)

When a family member dies, a day is normally set aside for the family and well wishers to meet to set a day for the final funeral rites. Even though the day traditionally is the week after the death of the person, it could be a day outside the customary seven day interval. This day is marked with the playing of songs and donations from sympathisers toward the funeral celebration. The main highlight of the week day celebration is the official announcement of the day for the final funeral rites [14]. Among the other items planned during the one week celebration include food, drinks and water for mourners

and loved ones, sound systems, casket, plot of land for the grave, among several others (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** A week day funeral celebration in Ghana.

### Ayie da (funeral day)

The final funeral rites are fixed on Friday where there is a wake keeping. These days most families in Ghana have removed the Friday wake keeping. The body is laid in state at the dawn of Saturday for family members and later sympathisers to file pass so as to pay their final respect to the departed. The status of the dead will determine the number of days to be used for the funeral celebration. If an ordinary member of the community dies, the final funeral rites will be completed by Sunday after the internment on Saturday. If the dead is a royal, the funeral rites may take several days. When the former Asantehemaa, Nana Afia Kobi Sewaah Ampem II died, her burial rites lasted for four days and the final funeral rites were observed for 14 days one year later.

The final interment of the dead at the cemetery does not end the funeral rites. The funeral ritual takes place at a designated spot where mourners go to show their respect to the bereaved family. Friends and sympathisers make donations to the bereaved family. The amount of donations received will depend on the social standing of the dead and also whether when the dead was alive, he or she also attended the funeral of others. The success of a funeral will be determined by the number of people who attended and how big a donation that was received [15]. Funerals in Ghana are very mournful as well as joyous occasions. De Witte makes this point succinctly: funerals are also the terrain of great creativity, where diverse forms of expression and art come together. Cultural groups perform traditional drum music or songs; a funeral is the place to show your dancing skills; highlife musicians make popular songs especially for funerals, commenting on the deep sorrow caused by death; pieces of poetic oratory tell of the life of the deceased; portrait paintings and

sculptures are put on the grave; photographs are enlarged, framed and exhibited or printed on T-shirts; video shots are taken and edited into a beautiful document; people dress up in the latest funeral fashion; and sometimes parts of the life of the deceased are acted out in theatre. Death, more than any other life event, seems to inspire people to artistic creations. A funeral celebration is a big explosion of life. It is an experience, which involves all senses. The music is so loud one cannot possibly hear one's neighbour. Visibility, seeing and being seen, is the core of every funeral. The abundant use of 'schnapps', akpeteshi (local gin) and beer makes the air heavy with alcohol. Shaking hundreds of hands gives a tactile impression of every person. Visiting a funeral means immersing oneself in an atmosphere loaded with emotions.

Funeral celebrations in Ghana have also become a business. When a death is recorded in a family and depending on the social standing of the dead person, the budget for the funeral could run into millions of Ghana cedis. De Witte commenting on this says:

In Ghana money and death are inextricably interwoven. Every death triggers a flow of money and the funeral business flourishes. The elaborate funeral celebrations during which no trouble or expense is spared contrast sharply with the daily struggle for the primary necessities of life. They are great public events, where families compete for prestige and respect by showing off wealth, and by publicly conforming to norms of solidarity and respect for the dead. Weeks or even months and millions of cedis are spent in organising an event, which impresses everybody.

One interesting aspect of funeral and business in Ghana is the activities of the professional mourners group. These professional mourners mostly found in Kumasi, the second largest city in Ghana, are hired by bereaved family to create an atmosphere of mourning for the funeral celebrations. Wailing and mourning are integral part of funeral celebrations in Ghana. In Kumasi, many families have found an ingenious way of making their funeral celebrations heavily patronized (Table 1). They hire the services of these professional mourners who charge them to perform mourning services during the funeral. In Kumasi, there is the Kumasi Funeral Criers Association, a group of talented and professional criers who are hired by families to cry at their funerals (Figure 2). In 2016, the Association increased its crying rate to meet the high cost of inputs into their trade. In a press statement the Association announced the following rates:

1	Crying with Swag	GHC 3,000
2	Deep Wailing and Shouting	GHC 2,700
3	Crying and Rolling on the Ground	GHC 3,500
4	Crying and Walking Around Funeral Ground	GHC 2,500
5	Highly Emotional Crying	GHC 3,200
6	Basic Crying	GHC 2,000
7	Crying and Vomiting	GHC 4,000
8	Chipmunk Crying	GHC 2,700

**Table 1.** In a press statement the association announced the above rates.





**Figure 2.** Some members of the professional mourners association plying their trade at a funeral in Kumasi.

### Funeral as a religious activity

Funeral celebration in Ghana is not only a social and economic activity but also, a religious one as well. Funeral celebrations mark the end of the life cycle as espoused by Van Gennep. The indigenous Ghanaian believed that for the dead to have a safe entry to Asamando, the ancestral home, the dead has to be given a fitting burial. A respondent commenting on the ritual importance of the funeral celebration states.

Spiritually from my point of view, in the Ghanaian society, we believe that, if the funeral rites of dead are not performed, the spirit of the dead will be roaming about. The spirit is unable to join the ancestors in the other world [16].

**Another respondent says:** So, when it's not entirely done, what happens is that, every individual has to be given a proper burial. The person has to be respected. So, when it is not done, we assume by our tradition that, the person's soul will not have peace and joy he or she is supposed to get. So, when it is properly done, it means he or she has been given a good burial at least, he or she obtains peace in the next world. You know in our tradition, we believe we are moving from this place to another world and for you to go there, you need these rites to be performed on you.

**One other respondent note:** When one dies, it does not mean he or she is gone. He or she is still walking around until he or she is buried, he lives in the house and community. So, until the rites are performed, he is sent to the grave, that is when he leaves this world entirely to the new world. If this is not done, it disturbs the family. The deceased thinks the family doesn't love him or her. He can then frustrate the family and relatives. He or she can also bring sicknesses and diseases upon the family.

There is the belief among Africans that failure to give a fitting burial rites to a deceased person could lead to some consequences. A respondent says:

For example, if the dead is a queen mother and when she was alive, she used to help people or the youth in the society but, since her death, the community is supposed to give her a good burial with the necessary rites but probably she was laid to rest without any proper rites performed. When this happens, her spirit would say 'why is it that, after all that I have done, they did not honour me and did my funeral anyhow'. The spirit can bring sicknesses like epilepsy upon the community (respondent 3, February 10, 2022).

Even though funeral celebrations in Ghana today may have lost some of its religious significance to economic and social significance, one cannot discount the fact that religious reasons still influence funeral celebrations in Ghana. I witnessed a funeral celebration in the Volta Region of Ghana where the funeral was performed exclusively as an indigenous African religious funeral ritual (Figure 3). The deceased was not associated with any church while alive so no church service was performed for the deceased. Before the body was moved from the funeral grounds to the cemetery, libation was offered. The body was taken through his family house where another libation was offered and before the coffin was lowered into the grave, a third libation was again offered (Figure 4).



**Figure 3.** Libation being offered at the funeral grounds for the deceased.



**Figure 4.** Libation being offered at the cemetery before the coffin was lowered into the grave.

With the advent of Christianity and Islam in Ghana, most of the indigenous rituals that were performed to see off the dead to the ancestral home have given way to Christian and Islamic rituals. Today, what is mostly practiced is the situation where there is a mixture of both indigenous and Christian funeral rituals. An example is when the former Asantehemaa buried. The four-day burial rituals known in the Akan as doteyie commenced with some private rituals performed late at night. Before her burial at the Berman Royal Mausoleum, there was a church service held for her by the Anglican church. The Asante monarchy has been associated with the Anglican church after their king, Nana Agyemang Prempeh I was exiled by the British to the Seychelles Island. On his return from exile, he adopted the Christian faith and became a member of the Anglican church.

## COVID-19 and funeral disruptions in Ghana

The advent of COVID-19 in Ghana disrupted the social life of Ghanaians. Among the first set of measures announced by the President of Ghana to deal with the pandemic was an imposition of restriction on social gatherings. The President in the interest of public safety and protection of the population in his second address to the nation on March 15, 2020 as stated earlier announced the ban on public gathering including funeral celebration. Funeral celebrations in Ghana usually bring hundreds to thousand mourners together from all walks of life depending on the social standing of the deceased person. Even though according to the address funerals were suspended, knowing how important it was for families to mourn their dead, the president allowed for private burial but with a limited number of mourners.

This restriction certainly led to disruptions with many families delaying the funeral celebrations of their loved ones since they could not fathom having a funeral service with just 25 mourners. Due to the contagious nature of the virus which is believed to be still active even at death, the GHS in accordance with the WHO protocol on burial did not release the dead bodies to families of the victims. The head of pathology department of the Greater Accra regional hospital, Dr. Simon Napor, states,

Due to the fact that even after death the bodies remain contagious, they are not released to the families, neither are any parts of the body such as the hair strands, nails or anything on the bodies at the time of their death.

An environmental officer with the Accra metropolitan assembly had this to say on the burial of some victims of the COVID-19 in Accra:

It is the responsibility of the environmental health officer to give persons who die of infectious diseases a befitting burial. In these cases, officers disinfect the bodies right from the mortuary to the cemetery to be laid to rest (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** A COVID-19 burial team burying a victim at the cemetery.

**Source:** Modernghana.com

In response to the how the advent COVID-19 has disrupted the celebration of funerals in Ghana, respondents interviewed had varied views. One respondent said that the advent of COVID-19 did not affect much. Another respondent said "People from outside the country and other part of the country couldn't come to see and mourn

their deceased family member" (respondent 3, February 10, 2022). Another respondent remarks:

The government said there shouldn't be mass gatherings. So, when the deceased is being taken from the morgue, they just gather about 20 to 25 mourners and perform the rites and take him or her to the cemetery. In this case, it has reduced the number of people who are supposed to partake in the funeral rites and its celebration (respondent 2, February 10, 2022).

Another respondent stated that the restrictions led to the situation. Where there were small number of people for the mourning and also, mourners were unable to shake hands and embrace one another during the period (respondent 1, February 10, 2022).

**Another respondent says:** You know, when the restriction came, it came with a minimum number. As usual in our culture, the way we do things, people will be coming to the funeral. When you have more people who are coming to the funeral, it shows the deceased has loved ones but, because, of the restriction, the number of friends, family and sympathizers reduced. In terms of the donation aspect too, the donations do not come. When people come, they register their presence by donating. However, the restriction disallowed that. Secondly, many people come to cry but because of COVID-19 restriction, they couldn't come. They couldn't come to help in assisting in cooking and others (respondent 4, February 10, 2022).

It is clear from the respondents that COVID-19 had an impact on funeral celebrations. The restrictions imposed by the government on the number of persons allowed to attend the funeral celebrations meant that many people were denied the chance to pay their last respect to the deceased. In some instances, children who were outside the country could not fly down to mourn and bury their parents since the airports were closed at the height of the pandemic. A respondent says the restriction affected the quality of mourning given to the deceased. He says:

It really affected the mourning. In our culture, when you have funerals and you have people coming, that's when we know that, you too you have friends and people who sympathise with you. When you don't see the impact on you. Secondly it really affected it more because, you need people to assist in terms of burial and all. The young people who would come and dig the grave were nowhere to be found. How people needed to be consoled by friends could not also happen (respondent 4, February 10, 2022).

**Another respondent in a response says:** Since the number of mourners reduced, it affected the quality of mourning. The crying reduced as compared to normal times when everyone would be crying and consoling one another through the shedding of tears, it was not so during the restriction (respondent 8, February 10, 2022).

**A third respondent also says:** The restrictions affected the quality of mourning in a way that, we were unable to shake hands, hug one another, eat together among others (respondent 2, February 10, 2022).

**One other respondent, however, saw the positive side of the restrictions. He says:**

I think it is much more positive. As I said earlier, it helped save money and resources. It also helped to reduce the spread of the



disease because the restriction reduced the number or limited the number of participants (respondent 6, February 10, 2022).

The restriction also affected the economics of the funeral celebrations. Due to the restrictions imposed, fewer mourners were allowed to attend the funeral. In Ghana the bigger the funeral the chances are that the family will be able to get enough donations to offset the expenditure for the funeral. A respondent commenting says: we could not have most of our family and friends attending the funeral which economically and socially affected us (respondent 10, February 10, 2022).

## Discussion

A report by DW, the German news network, revealed that many families left their dead relatives in the morgue since they did not want to have a private burial with few people in attendance. One relative told the DW, "If I'm told to go and remove my mother's body from the morgue, then I don't know where I should take it because we are not used to this private (burial) thing. Later when everything is over, then maybe I will have an actual burial". In order to ease the burden imposed on families who had to bury their loved ones, the President of Ghana in his 26<sup>th</sup> COVID-19 address to the nation, announced an easing on the restrictions imposed on the celebrations of funerals. He says:

The COVID-19 Taskforce, which I chair, has recommended that a second look be taken at the protocols that have been put in place for the holding of funerals across the country. I have, in previous updates, emphasised the need for the strict observance of safety protocols at funerals, and the following measures are a set of enhanced protocols which must be adhered to by all at funerals:

- All events associated with funerals must be held in open air spaces;
- There must be observance of the one (1) metre social distancing rule by sympathisers;
- The wearing of masks is mandatory, and persons must respect the enhanced hygiene protocols;
- Funerals should not go beyond the two (2) hour time duration;
- Post-funeral receptions are banned;
- Handshakes must be avoided; and
- One-week funeral celebrations are restricted solely to family members, and should not exceed a duration of two (2) hours.

These guidelines are still in force and have not been reviewed even though the compliance levels have reduced considerably. Funerals now travel beyond the 2 hours duration and the one-meter seating arrangements are not strictly followed. The wearing of face mask, hand washing and use of hand sanitisers are however, been done. Hand shaking which is a very common practice in funeral celebrations in Ghana has also been replaced with waving. Even though COVID-19 has affected how funeral celebration is performed in Ghana, respondents interviewed were unanimous that the effect was temporal and that when the government removes all restrictions, the funeral celebrations in Ghana will resume its vibrant nature.

## Conclusion

The emergence of COVID-19 in the world in late 2019 took the world by surprise. The coming of COVID-19 to Ghana led to the disruption of the social and economic life of Ghanaians. This paper using both primary and secondary data vividly demonstrates how funeral celebrations in Ghana were disrupted during the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana.

Funerals have served as an important socio-religious events to see off departed members of the family to the spiritual world. Ghanaians have the belief that if the funeral of a departed member of the family is not held or properly done, the spirit of the dead person may not have an easy acceptance to the ancestral world and the soul may hover around and could cause disaster to the living. It for this reasons that as was stated earlier, some family members decided to keep their corpse of their family members in the morgue so as to perform a fitting burial for the deceased once the COVID-19 restrictions were eased for more people to attend the funeral.

With the easing of the restrictions imposed on the funeral celebrations by the President of Ghana, full participation by members of the community in the funeral celebrations have started. Even though much of the COVID-19 protocols are still being observed by the mourners, protocols such as distancing and washing of hands under running water are not being rigorously being practiced. Despite the fact that the advent of COVID-19 in Ghana in March, 2020, affected negatively the celebration of funerals in the communities, it nevertheless brought some positive changes to the mode of funeral celebrations in Ghana. As one of my respondents said:

COVID-19 has not really negatively affected the celebration of funeral in Ghana. However, it has made the burial process faster. Sometimes, we keep long with the dead too much. I think going forward we would not keep long with it (respondent 1, February 10, 2022).

The celebration of funerals in Ghana is not just a family affair but a communal one. People from far and near, both family and friends and sympathisers travel to come to just pay their last respect to the deceased person. Celebration of funerals in Ghana are largely colourful and expensive. The reason it attracts many people so their donations could help take care of the funeral expenses. The imposition of restrictions by the government during the advent of the COVID-19, led to the disruption of the funeral celebrations as the ritual was considered one of the main transmitters of the virus because of the number of mourners that may gather for the funeral celebration.

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