

Tribulations Inherent in Mourning Rituals and Practices in Asare Konadu's *Ordained by the Oracle*

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Abstract: This article aims at examining critically the tribulations related to mourning rituals and practices from a literary point of view through the lens of Asare Konadu's *Ordained by the Oracle* and at unveiling widowers' plight in Africa as exposed in the novel. The novel explores the clash between traditional Akan customs and modern beliefs in Ghana. The story centres on Boateng, a prosperous trader, who begins to question these customs after the sudden death of his wife. As he undergoes traditional funeral rituals, he gains a deeper understanding of their significance and the spiritual world. This research work is salient in the sense that it explores widowers' predicament in the arena of African traditional religion and its impact on the living spouses, namely the husbands. The qualitative research methodology is used in this study in order to find relevant information or data through documentary research. This methodology has permitted me to collect and analyse data coming from Internet sources, such as E-books and academic articles, and from library sources in order to carry out this research work efficiently. To conduct this study, I have employed two literary theories, namely sociological criticism which deals with the values of the society and how they are used in literary works, and mythological criticism which puts a particular emphasis on the subject of death and life which is present in the novel. The study has found that mourning rituals and practices as they appear in the novel under study are too hard and need to be alleviated as far as possible. It concludes that widowers deserve a good treatment in Ghana where the novel is set and in Africa at large.

Keywords: Widowers, Akans, plight, tradition, widowhood.

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Introduction

Traditions interfere with African people's lives through ceremonies such as naming ceremonies, wedding, widowhood, mourning, etc. In these different ceremonies, many rituals are performed in order to have the blessing of the Supreme God through gods or ancestors. So, rituals are very important in Africa. Death in particular gives rise to a series of rituals through a rite of passage that prepares the spirit of the deceased for the journey to the world of the ancestors. This research work is salient in the sense that it explores widowers' predicament in the arena of African traditional religion and its impact on the living spouses, namely husbands.

To conduct this study efficiently, the theoretical framework I have employed encompasses two literary theories, namely sociological criticism which deals with the values of the society and how they are used in literary works, and mythological criticism which puts a particular emphasis on the subject of death and life which is present in the novel. The qualitative research methodology is used in this study in order to find relevant information or data through documentary research. This methodology has permitted me to collect and analyse data coming from Internet sources, such as E-books and academic articles, and

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from library sources in order to carry out this research work efficiently. The pertinence of the theories and methods employed lies in the fact that they will induce an understanding of the theme under study and a literary appraisal of widowhood through a study of the chosen novel. This study is divided into three sections, namely death, burial and mourning rituals, widowers' treatment and its repercussions and social support and the failure of Christianity.

Death, Burial and Mourning Rituals

Death

According to K. Arhin (1994), "Death is an inevitable part of human life. It is the transition point among the Akan people. Whatever is made or created inevitably dies. Asantes perform rituals for their dead kinsmen and loved ones in general." The novel under study deals with the premature death of Dora, Boateng Akwabena's wife, who has died from diabetes. She should be buried according to the Akan customary rites through which the writer recounts the Akan traditional values based in this context on the strict respect of mourning rituals which Boateng, the protagonist of the novel, finds very hard. The author highlights the

problematic issue of widowerhood which African writers rarely address because of the dominance of male chauvinism in African societies (Y. C. Aguessy, 2020, p. 18). According to T. N. Quarcoopome (1987, p. 124), "Death is the last of the rites of passage that a person has to go through on earth (after birth, puberty and marriage)."

The death of a loved person has a great impact on the family of the deceased and even on the whole community. One of the female characters, namely, Madam Akua Danyame, refers to the importance that people accorded to death in the past as follows: "In the past as soon as death was announced, everything was closed up for the day. Housewives stopped cooking and husbands started looking for palm wine for they knew there would be no food for the rest of the day" (p. 128). She deplores the fact that things have changed nowadays. She laments: "Things have changed. I wonder why they talk of progress when things are rather going from worse to worst" (p. 128). She has said what has been mentioned in the two quotations above while she "was talking about people 'who nowadays go to funeral celebrations after they have eaten tightly'" (p. 128). This shows the importance accorded to death in the past. By the same token, this condemns the fact that nowadays things have negatively changed in the name of "progress."

The magnitude of the death depends on whether it is expected (for sick people) or unexpected (for people who die through accident). So death is expected when the individual goes through a process of gradual termination before death occurs whereas in unexpected death, this process is absent or is relatively short. After Boateng's wife's death in the novel, he says: "'Oh Dora come back. Why did you leave me in this state? I never thought death would come so soon. Oh Dora, you have led me from shallow waters and left me in deep waters when you know I cannot swim, oh, oh, Dora'" (p. 237). Through this excerpt, Boateng expresses the deep sorrow he feels after his wife's death. We notice that Dora's death is unexpected because nobody thought that she would die at the general ward. Africans fear death and often do not encourage the meditation of death, be it their own death or another person's death. It is a taboo to discuss one's death. Death is also considered as an enemy of life and African people believe that life should be preserved by all means even if the case is a hopeless one. In Africa, life is sacred and any voluntary termination of life is considered as a premature death and can have some repercussions. A. Konadu depicts this fact in his novel in these terms:

'Oh God, make me a man fit for this challenge,' he concluded. Because he would be dead just as Dora had died and both of them would lie side by side in the same tomb taking in their arms the whole of the heavenly kingdom, if ever there was such a place as the Christians said. He did not want to go back to Nsamansie where the dead resided when they died. There he had been told premature deaths had no place and their spirits were driven away, back to earth to spend the rest of their days in cemeteries and lurk in dark forests and corners.' (p. 21)

Religion refers to different afterlives and laws of the karma that try to answer the following questions: "What happens after death?" and "Does it all really end?" The bereaved themselves try to answer these questions with different rituals and avoidance of oblivion by remembering their love or affection for the

deceased people and by building memorials for them. According to the traditional African belief system, "the dead are not dead," and the cult of the ancestors or ancestor worship is practiced in most African communities and is based on the belief that the life course is cyclical and not linear. Owing to this system of belief, it is believed that those who are dead are alive in another world or state. Death leaves many questions unanswered and the family of the deceased tries to find the answers to them. In Africa, the first question that comes in the mind is the cause of a person's death. In many cultures, the cause of the death is sought from dead ancestors; with death causes usually attributed to spiritual elements (witchcraft, offending one's ancestors, or gods) rather than others reasons. The writer substantiates this fact in his novel when he writes:

'Elders of Asamang, that is the message. Taking the sand and the pebble together, this means Dora was knocked out of this world as she became a victim of isolation.'

'Who might have done it?' the linguist put the question.

'We also tried to find out. But the answer from the Great Tano was that he came to fetch live-coal to make his fire but not to find out what is cooking.' (p. 171)

The elders send the messengers to consult the oracle to know the real cause of Dora's death. The messengers go and come back with a handful of smooth sand and one pebble which allows the linguist to decode the message of the oracle about the cause of Dora's death. He concludes that Dora has died of witchcraft and the person behind this is unknown because the oracle has refused to give his identity. Furthermore, African people believe that to be in the world of the ancestors confers powers over the people in the world of the living, such as the ability to bless or to curse, and to give life or to take life among others.

During the ceremony to say good-bye to his dead wife, Boateng pours libations, and he says the desire of his heart and his wishes to Dora, his dead wife. The term grief refers to our thoughts and feelings in the inside. After the loss of loved one, people's initial private response is grief. They feel bereaved, which means that they are "torn apart." Grief as part of the psychological effects of death is a universal reaction that occurs in the socio-cultural context. Many people experience grief and a sense of loss when death occurs. But the ways they experience and express these feeling may differ across cultures. In each culture, death is associated with rituals and customs to help people with the grieving process. Rituals offer people ways to process and express their grief. Despite cultural norms, some people want to express their grief in ways that suit them because there is no correct way to grieve.

Some individuals adopt bad behaviours to help cope with or forget the loss. The writer depicts this in the novel through the main character, Boateng. He adopts some negative thoughts and bad behaviours after his wife's death. The excerpt below substantiates this fact:

In one instance he heard a passenger remark: 'I think this man is mad.' He was anything but mad and so lifted himself up and made for the next house he saw. He entered without knowing where he was and sat down on the first chair available.

A young woman in a bright-coloured front came to him and asked, 'What will you drink?'

'So this is a bar,' he thought, 'and if drink will take my sorrow away, I shall drink all myself off.'

'Three tots of whisky and soda,' he said. (p. 28)

This excerpt reveals the different ways in which Boateng expresses his grief. He loses hope, wanders in the city like a mad person and addicts himself to alcohol drinking to drown his sorrow caused by Dora's death. His behaviour is probably partly due to the tribulations that he is about to undergo. So, he drinks whisky and soda not only to drown his sorrow, but also to get prepared for the ensuing tribulations.

Burial and Mourning Rituals

Burial is a method of parting with the corpse after death. It is a ritual in which the body of the loved one is placed inside the ground. There are diverse burial rites in Africa which have been practiced from times immemorial, depending on the deceased person's origin, culture, religion and the position he held in the community while he was alive. Most cultures part with the corpse of their dead through burial in order to separate the dead from the living. Ghana's cultures are not an exception. They use various rituals concerning the burials and these vary according to ethnicity, clan, kinship and belief system. The body can be placed in a casket, which is sealed before it is placed inside the ground with the deceased person's favourite or cherished objects. In certain cultures, people bury the dead with all the comfort that he may need in his afterlife. In *Ordained by the Oracle*, A. Konadu confirms this in chapter thirteen when he writes: "This said, the coffin was nailed with Dora lying on a cushion of all the cloths and gifts which during the day had been piled on the bed" (p. 181-182). This sentence shows us that Dora has been buried following the Akan culture and that her corpse has been placed in a coffin with all the favorite objects which belong to her. It is believed that she still has the same desires, such as money, food, drink, clothes. So, all of these things are placed in the coffin with her corpse. Although this practice emanates from Akan culture, it may be seen as part and parcel of the tribulations inherent in mourning rituals since it induces exorbitant expenses. The typical funeral in the Akan region of Ghana is often known to cost nearly as much as one Ghanaian's yearly income (R. Bonetti, 2010, p. 25). Money is collected, borrowed, and donated toward the execution of a perfect funeral-success being measured by extravagance and attendance. The two to eight hour performances require intense planning and spending for space, service conductors, seating arrangements, clothing, musicians, transportation, activities, coffins, and elaborate banquets (S. K. Bonsu, 2003, p. 44).

After death, the deceased person still exists but now inhabits the spirit world and can be reincarnated into several people. If the deceased lived a life of dishonour or the burial rituals are not performed correctly, his spirit may remain as part of the bereaved family and wander around and haunt them. The honour of being part of the community of the ancestors, a place highly valued in African beliefs, is forbidden to wizards, witches and other undeserving people who may be denied a proper burial. When Boateng's wife has passed away, the custodian old woman warns him against the violation of their tradition at the beginning of the mourning rituals in these terms:

'The death came suddenly and it is important in the interest of your own safety to fight her spirit away so that it will never return for any further communion with you. So don't take anything we ask you lightly.'

'Follow each act in detail and see to it that you do not violate any of the things declared as taboos while the mourning period of forty days lasts' [...]. (p. 65)

In *Ordained by the Oracle*, as soon as Dora dies, her body is prepared for the burial. The burial has taken place at night on the third day after the death. On the eve of the burial, people have brought some gifts for Dora and, through her, to the dead ancestors. The gifts are shown to the widower first before they are put in a corner on the bed where Dora is lying in state, after a little speech. "Attendees at Akan funerals are required to make financial contributions to the bereaved family to help defray expenses that accrue from burial and mourning rituals. Indeed, indicators of the success of an Akan funeral include the number of persons who attend and the total cash receipts realized from donations" (De Witte, 2001; Fosu, 2000, cited by M. Adinkrah, 2021, p. 481-482). Referring to the collective mood of the Asante community and to a lesser degree of the Akan society of Ghana, Y. Mane (2020, p. 188) writes:

According to the Asante tradition when a person passed away, all the neighboring villages partake in the ceremony and share the funeral expenses. Through a realistic outlook, the narrator-ethnographer puts it as follows: "Dora Boateng's funeral was no exception. People came by motor road, footpath" p. (20), and the narrator keeps on explaining: "It was customary that when anybody died all the people of Asamang joined the bereaved to bury the dead." (p. 20)

The widower and the elders have a special way of clothing for the mourning as shown in this quotation "The elders sat round on their raffia palm mats, their legs folded. They wore mourning-cloths not different from Boateng's and they had decorated their temples with red clay, which was another sign of mourning" (p. 137). Although Boateng may see this peculiar way of dressing as part and parcel of his tribulations, it seems to bring out an important aspect of mourning rituals as far as the getup of the mourners is concerned.

Dora's spirit has spoken to Boateng through the priestess who has behaved as if she were Dora herself. In a long discourse from page 155 to page 158, the priestess has spoken to him through Dora's voice. Referring to the priestess, the narrator writes:

Then she would begin calling the names of people she wanted to see. To some, it was just a greeting, to others a request. Boateng wondered what she had got to tell him. But he could not find his voice to answer the greeting the woman called. Not only was her voice steeled in the way his wife spoke to him when she was angry but the priestess had in her voice strains of stammering, well known to Boateng as characteristic of Dora. [...]. (p. 155)

After the instructions that Boateng has received from the priestess, or rather from Dora, as far as their children are concerned, "Boateng could not speak and the rest of what the priestess said he heard as if in a trance" (p. 157). Boateng wonders: "How did she get to know the details she spoke of? Was it true [that] spirits existed and could appear?" (p. 157). However, he is sure that "[...] he was not only facing a spirit but learning of things which the priestess could know

nothing about unless she was genuinely filled with Dora's spirit" (p. 157). To crown it all, Dora tells her sister, Boateng's sister-in-law, something that the priestess seems not to have mentioned while talking to him: "I have a sum of £100 with Boateng. I have asked him to give it to you. Don't waste it but use it in starting a little house of your own outside the family house" (p. 159). Although "He [Boateng] did not think of keeping the money for himself" (p. 159), "He had an idea of using it on the children's education, but now it was known and he could not deny it to his sister-in-law" (p. 159). So, it is clear that Boateng has no alternative left but give the money to his sister-in-law as requested by his deceased wife lest he should provoke her wrath. This constitutes one aspect of the tribulations inherent in mourning rituals. Referring to the hereafter, T. N. Quarcoopome (1987, p. 125) posits:

[...] death is not the end of human existence. There is life beyond the grave, a belief shared by all religions. The traditional belief is that when the breath of life leaves the person, he stops breathing and is declared dead. The physical frame rots in the ground. Some components of the man like the *Sunsum* among the Akans and the *Ojiji* (Shadow) among the Yoruba perishes with man at death. But the soul, the essential person survives death and returns to God. Before God or the ancestors, the soul has to render account of its stewardship on earth.

Death therefore is regarded as a transition from a state of existence to another. It is a passage from this earthly existence to another world. In this view, great care is taken in burying the dead. There are elaborate funeral rites and ceremonies which reinforce the belief that death is only a transition and therefore that there is life after death. Depending on the status of the deceased, there may be drumming, dancing, firing of muskets and guns and the pouring of libation as part of the funeral rites. Messages are given to the deceased to be delivered to past relatives of the family. Burial follows an elaborate wake-keeping with the deceased lying in state.

After this episode, Boateng has to get ready for his wife's burial after a series of rituals. All this is intended to protect him from the spirit of his deceased wife. The foregoing excerpt is a proof:

Boateng came out of the room minutes later smelling like curried rice. The scent from his body created by the pepper seeds and clover leaves besmeared on him after bath, he felt was enough to dispel any spirit. To this, he added the Prekese fruit and the burnt corn-on-the cob which he carried wherever he went. He was now ready to take his seat in the compound where preparations had already started for the burial of Dora. He came out and sat at the bottom of the staircase leading to the room. (p. 162-163)

Although the special bath and other rituals that Boateng has had are intended to dispel any spirit and prepare him for his deceased wife's burial, he may see it as a tribulation. When the body is placed in the coffin, after the elders have poured libation, the community members can say their last good-byes, and give testimonies about the deceased. When the body is carried out of the house, the pallbearers start the eulogy of the dead. The eulogy serves as a means of honouring the deceased and also for psychological relief.

Burial ensures that the ancestor that the deceased has thus become does not harm the bereaved family, but rests in peace and protects the family. This belief comes from the Africans' view of existence after death. The writer underlines this fact through the following quotation:

'Dora Serwaah, for you a drink. Tonight we are bound to say good-bye. Not that we will it but by God's hand we today part company, the leader, a woman of nearly eighty, said in libation. 'I speak not for myself but for all those who are born with by our fathers. You know this is a big family in our patriclan beginning with Okraku who bore your father's father to the little child of your brother Kwaku Atopa. We ask for long life from you and prevent us from the wrath of our ancestors so that you can continue to bury your dead "fathers" for you. Take this drink and drink while you travel. We bless your way, *kose, kose.*' (p. 180-181)

A. Konadu shows that the leader considers Dora's spirit as an ancestor and consequently asks her spirit for the protection of the whole family through libation. This has taken place in the night of the burial when the corpse is carried out of the house where it lies in state.

In African traditional religion, the dead are generally buried in their land of ancestry. Burial, to be proper, honourable, meaningful and acceptable in most African cultures has to be done in the deceased person's ancestral land. African people have traditionally used their homestead as a final resting place where their dead would be buried. This is done because there is a specific meaning attached to the dead being buried at their home. Technological advancement and shortage of burial space have partly contributed to the popular use of the cemetery for burial. It is the case of Dora who has been buried in the cemetery. S. Ngubane (2004) thinks that to die in traditional belief is like going back home where you belong. The dead person joins the people who died before him, and as such, he or she needs a proper burial, where there will be elements of respect and dignity. Although it seems absurd, this belief is a reality in most African communities. It gives rise to a series of complex rituals such as the mourning rituals which may be seen as tribulations. Referring to the complexity of these rituals. R. Lee *et al.* (2008, p. 2) as cited by Y. C. Aguessy (2020, p. 21-22) argue:

If African societies evolved elaborate and complex rituals to manage death, this was because, for them too, death provoked fear and revulsion and posed a problem for the living. The ultimate purpose of mortuary customs was to allow the living to get on with living. And in order for this to be achieved, there was no short-cutting the work of mourning. To simplify, the dead could only find their place as ancestors, rather than vengeful ghosts, if their loss had been properly registered, not only by the individuals closest to them, but by the social groups of which they were members.

Depending on the culture, there are various ways that can be used to celebrate the life of the deceased. These can involve either the destruction of the body (for example, by cremation or sky burial) or its preservation (for example, by mummification or interment). O. M. Aborampah (1999, p. 261) as cited by I. Boaheng (2023, p. 135) posits:

“The indestructible spirit component of the human individual had to be managed back into the continuity from whence it had emanated. On the one hand, properly transacted mortuary rituals [are] the indispensable instruments of that process of management. On the other hand, imperfectly performed or neglected mortuary rituals [would leave] the departed in anxious uncertainty of limbo” which would prompt the dead to harass the living and exact retribution from them.

Different beliefs about the relationship between body and soul are reflected in funerary practices. Funerals are ceremonies organised to remember, honour and sanctify the dead. Funerals in most nations in Africa are organised essentially to mourn and celebrate the life of the deceased. In Ghana, they are a big deal. They are an essential part of honouring the departed, and each funeral can take weeks or months to plan and complete. Firstly, there is an enormous social pressure surrounding burial. Second, there is the more familiar motivator of honouring the memory of a deceased person's life as well as embracing the “hereafter” towards which the deceased is headed. The social drive works to promote the surviving relatives, reinforcing the sincerity and meaningfulness of relationships through a material display of devotional “proof,” as well as meeting the social expectations of public grieving (S. Van Der Geest, 2000, p. 107).

In Akan culture, a person's death and funeral are significant for the whole community. A person's family plays an important role in preparing the body, both before and after the death. The belief that there is a spirit land where dead ancestors live in a world similar to the world of the living, generates the fear that the spirit of the deceased spouse may haunt or torment and even kill the living spouse. To prevent this from happening, specialists take the necessary precautions as shown in this excerpt:

Pots of herbs were brought in and some of their waters poured into earthenware pot.

‘Strip your clothes and have your bath,’ he was asked. ‘These leaves will prevent your wife's spirit from following you.’ [...].

‘Now here is your towel, ‘the woman handed it over him. It was the stuff beaten from a bunch of plantain, and the fibre coarse and slippery, with the juice still fresh, absorbed the water and boiled leaves rather slowly leaving beads of perspiration on him. When it was all over he smelt of cinnamon and neem.

The Kuntunkuni cloth which was from now on to become his clothing was given to him but not before they had strung and put round his waist a brass padlock, the red feather of a parrot and the claws of chameleon.

And he was now prepared to face the body of his wife. (p. 67-68)

The foregoing excerpt clearly shows that Boateng has undergone a complicated cleansing so that the spirit of his deceased wife may not do him any harm. Despite the fact that the cleansing aims at preventing his wife's spirit from following him, it is a kind of tribulation insofar as it is a bit complicated. Another rite has followed the one mentioned in the above excerpt to appease Dora's wandering spirit and to further protect Boateng.

He poured the first drops of the bottle down and said in a shaky voice:

‘Dora Serwaah’ (for that was Dora's maiden name and he thought she should listen to him in that name better in her other name), daughter of the great farmer of Ashanti. Come and drink from my hand today. I call you not out of happiness but out of sorrow. Tonight I stand here a pitiful figure because you have left us in this world without any care and provision. If you died no natural death but someone sought to cut your life short on this earth, seek revenge...

He had poured about half of the bottle on the floor now. He weighed again the last sentence as he looked at the schnapps flowing near his feet. He knew he had done a lot things which Dora didn't like and if she attacked him what would he do? So he began the next sentence.

‘I am exempted of course. As you know it is the stones nearest to each other that rub. Bless your children and me and give us long life and do not let any mishap come our way. Now I say good-bye with this handkerchief. The money here is your fare to Nsamansie and the cowries for Amokyi. If there was any marriage we contracted on earth, it is all over and I give you your freedom.’ (p. 83-84)

In the above quotation, Boateng's tribulations continue through a long ritual. Here again, he has used given money as his deceased wife's fare because she is about to start a no-return journey to the world of the ancestors. More importantly, this ritual aims at breaking his marriage with her and at giving her her freedom. Thus, she will feel free to contract another marriage in the world of the ancestors.

As people generally believe in Africa, no death is natural and whenever somebody dies, his or her death is systematically attributed to a malevolent person. So, there is no wonder when after Dora's death, one of his living relatives laments : “‘We have never known disgrace in our family. We know yours is a journey of no return but should we be denied the reason of your departure from us? No. That is why we ask tonight: let us know who sent you on your journey before your time’” (p. 181). It is crystal clear that the widower suffers a lot in the community depicted in the novel under study. Boateng has undergone a lot of tribulations in his mourning period as illustrated so far. The narrator refers to one of them in this quote :

‘It is time now to smash the pot,’ Kofi Amapa said.

Boateng raised it from his head and with all the strength let in him smashed the black pot in the centre of the path. As he let it go, he could feel the brass padlock dangling from his waist. ‘Turn quickly and run,’ Kofi Amapa said.

In the distance they could hear the chant of the procession entering deep into the wooden cemetery where Dora was being put to rest. (p. 193)

The quote reveals that Boateng has performed another ritual at the right moment when his wife is about to be buried in the cemetery. It means that he is not allowed to take part in the burial. In most African societies, the widower does not take part in the burial of

his deceased spouse. In *Ordained by the Oracle*, the widower is only allowed to take part in the memorial service after the burial has taken place.

A memorial service (or celebration of life) is a funerary ceremony that is performed without the remains of the deceased person. This celebration can be elaborated lively and costly. It begins after the burial and can take place at a funeral home; however, it can be held in a home, school, workplace or other location of some significance. In *Ordained by the Oracle*, the narrator says: "When they arrived at the market place, only Mami Kai and her associated had arrived and were sitting on the raffia mat. Boateng led by Kofi Amapa and Manu and Ayitey who had come from Ho for the final obsequies, took their place and waited" (p. 221). This excerpt helps us to understand that Dora's memorial service has taken place at the market place and people have travelled from all parts of the country to join in the festivities. Funerals are usually public ceremonies involving the entire members of the family, friends and well-wishers. The number and class of people present during a funeral may be an indication of the character, the financial status, and the position of the family in the society and how sociable the deceased was before his or her death.

At the celebration, Akan chiefs sit in the shade of colourful umbrellas to observe. The family members of the deceased wear red and black clothes. Traditional greetings are used as mentioned in the novel:

Other people from outside Asamang who were coming to the obsequies also went round to greet the people. They shook hands with the mourners.

'*Duee anyaado, Duee Amu,*' they said in greeting as they slowly moved along the line.

'*Yaa Apeafo, Yaa Aku donto,*' the mourners responded.

Boateng, as the widower, did not shake hands. He merely nodded as they passed him with Kofi Amapa taking the handshakes. When it all ended he had shaken not less than five hundred hands. Then came the donations. These were not unexpected. Like the festivals, that was the way the people helped the bereaved family to pay off the debt incurred. (p. 229)

The treasurer is in charge of taking the donations of the different groups and of presenting them to the mourners. After this, people begin drinking and drumming groups play and dance till the night. This entails expenses for the bereaved family, especially for the widower, Boateng, even though the donations may cover part of the expenses.

V. Mazzucato *et al.* (2006) and K. Agyekum (2008) as cited by S. Adu-Gyamfi *et al.* (2020, p. 49) refer to the importance of donations during funerals in these terms:

Funerals are instances of exchanges and redistribution of resources [...]. Significantly, the Akan people resort to the collection of *nsawa* to defray funeral debts. The idea of *nsawa* expounds the Akan emphasis on communalism rather than individualism. In Asante, it is irresponsible to attend funerals without making donation [...]. The donation of resources or the *nsawa*

is meant to recoup the financial resources lost in funerals [...].

This quotation clearly shows the outstanding role of donations during funerals among the Akan of Ghana.

Widowers' Treatment and its Repercussions

Widowers' Treatment

African cultures are diverse, and there are many commonalities with regard to widowerhood rites and practices. Widowerhood is the state or period of being a widower. It is also a series of cultural rituals that any surviving male spouse undergoes to honour the dead spouse. In Ghana as in others parts of Africa, widowers are subjected to a lot of 'complicated' rituals in an attempt to purify themselves and fight away the spirit of the dead spouse.

In *Ordained by the Oracle* A. Konadu presents Dora's death as the source of Boateng's submission to mourning rituals and practices. This is the starting point of the tribulations inherent in mourning rituals and practices in the novel. When Dora has died, Boateng is required to leave his home and go to his wife's patrimonial house where her corpse lies in state. Then, Boateng has slept on a grass mat in the room accompanied by his guide who is supposed to guide him in all that he must do. Some old women are also present to watch over him. Boateng is not allowed to eat heavily and he must eat while the sun has set and not more than once a day. It is a taboo to eat underground food like cassava, yam and cocoyam. In Akan areas, the food is boiled eggs which must be eaten without biting through them and cup of steaming porridge. So, the complexity of the mourning rituals which Boateng is submitted to lies in the fact that there are totemic precepts that he has to respect from the beginning to the end of the rituals as mentioned in the quotation below :

You must not eat anything while the sun has not set and not more than once a day.

You must not eat anything growing underground and these include, cassava, yam, cocoyam.

During the mourning period of forty days this should be your dress. (They thrust at him a mourning black cloth called kuntunkuni.)

You will be provided with a guide for that period and he will accompany you everywhere you go. You will eat when he eats and you will sleep when he sleeps. In other words he will guide you in all that you must do. (p. 65-66)

The above quotation clearly shows that the protagonist of the novel is compelled to a special diet and to special rules during the mourning period which lasts forty days. These totemic precepts summed up into four points constitute a kind of cross that Boateng has to wear in order to abide by this age-old custom. Since his refusal to respect scrupulously these precepts may lead to his death, he has no alternative left but obey the person in charge. This clearly shows the reason why Boateng sees the mourning rituals as tribulations.

During the mourning period of forty days and nights, the Kuntunkuni, the mourning black cloth is his dress. Brass padlock, the red feather of a parrot and the claws of a chameleon are tied around his waist to prevent his wife's spirit from having

sexual intercourses with him. Boateng has to walk barefooted wherever he goes during the period of mourning. He must face his wife's body after some rituals. Before facing his wife's body, Boateng is going to take his bath with some leaves which are meant to prepare and protect him. He is asked to go and look at Dora's corpse and then the door is shut behind him, and he is left alone for some time with his wife's corpse so that he should to say 'good-bye' to her. "But that was only the first day out of the forty in which he was to mourn his wife and carry out customary practices and sacrifices" (p. 88). Although all these mourning rituals and practices are meaningful and useful among the Akan people of Ghana, Boateng sees most of them as tribulations. For instance, he finds it difficult to understand why he has to walk barefooted during the whole mourning period. Tradition is tradition, and no one has the right to question its opacity. However, in some African societies, the mourning period may be shortened and the rituals abbreviated. In the novel under study, it is compulsory for the widower to undergo all the rituals which cover the forty days prescribed as the mourning period by tradition. So the length of the mourning period and the great number of mourning rituals make the whole thing look like a series of tribulations.

After the ceremony organised so that Boateng should say 'good-bye' to his wife, he should go through many other ceremonies. The next one is the cleansing ceremony which takes place in the sea. The custodians have given him some instructions that should be strictly followed. They have coached him before he walks down to the sea alone to start the ceremony. The narrator highlights this ceremony through the following excerpt:

'This is the ceremony to cleanse yourself of any association spiritually and bodily you have had with your wife. That over, you must part company and you must wash yourself in the sea which takes everything,' he said.

'The longer you stay in the sea the cleaner you become and you must not rush out until you are sure every part of you has been washed clean. Where is your hand?' she asked. (p. 96-97)

The foregoing excerpt sums up the requirements and the importance of the ceremony of cleansing for the widower. The burial has taken place in the third day preceding the final obsequies when the cock has crowed once. When Dora's body is ready for the burial, Boateng and his guide are made to walk in front of the procession, followed by the pallbearers with the corpse in the coffin. He carries a 'Kuna kuku', an earthenware pot with stones in it. At the Daafoo junction just before the return to the cemetery, he is made to stop; then he has thrown the pot and its contents away before heading straight for home without looking back.

After the burial, Boateng together with his guide and his wife's relatives, have gone to the cemetery to visit Dora's grave. He has taken with him the towel and the sponge he has been using since he has started the mourning rituals. He has left all these things on the tomb after the libation. Kofi Amapa, his guide, clearly explains him the aim of this visit. The following quotation sums it up: "Exactly. You are visiting her for the first time and our main aim is to see where she was buried" (p. 206). During the final obsequies which have taken place at the market place, Boateng, together with his guide and his friends, have sat

in the place to receive their sympathisers and the donations. The Nkontabuo is another ritual which has allowed the widower to touch money for the first time since his wife's death. He also has to go through the *Sora* during which he has cut his nails and hair and placed them in a big pan before all the members of Dora's paternal clan.

Forty days later, the widower has removed the mourning cloth, the brass padlock and he has become free. After all this, the widower could remarry if he wants even though in Akan areas no woman wants to marry a widower. Kofi Amapa and Boateng have discussed this taboo in the following quotations: "No woman will like to die and they always believe once a widower, you have to get a third wife buried before you can get out of the rut" (p. 152); "But how about you? Why have you not married? Boateng asked (p. 153). And Kofi Amapa answered: "For the same reason. Nobody wants to die and I have no money to cleanse myself of the spirit of the dead woman, to marry again" (p. 153). Kofi Amapa shows how it is hard to get a woman to marry when the widower does not perform the ritual of cleansing himself. It is easier if the widower meets a widow whom he can marry without any difficulty insofar as they both have the same social status. In addition, if he had a second wife as in Boateng's case, he does not have to go through any ritual to cleanse himself again.

Boateng's tribulations in the novel under study clearly show that there are unbearable elements in the way mourning rituals are carried out for widowers among the Akans. However, there is an improvement in such rituals. For example, there are substantial changes in Akan mortuary rituals such as the trend toward the abandonment of practices perceived to encroach on individual human rights (M. Adinkrah (2021, p. 486). Referring to some of the changes which have occurred as far mortuary rituals among the Akans are concerned (Asante & Mazama, 2009; Osafo, 2021 as cited M. Adinkrah, 2021, p. 486) write:

The deceased person's relatives are no longer required to shave their heads during the mourning period. Also, in former times, Akan mourners were not allowed to wear bodily adornments like earrings, necklaces, sandals, and shoes during the mourning period. This practice is no longer severely enforced. Also, some Akan communities have banned wake keeping. In many Akan communities, all interments and funerals occur on one predetermined day during the month. This date is set for all funerals and interments that occurred during the preceding month. For example, in some Akan communities, burials and funerals are scheduled to occur during the first weekend of a new month. Also, in many Akan communities, there is only one funeral; the organization of second funerals has been discontinued

The above quotation is an indication that things have changed nowadays as far as widowerhood and widowhood among the Akans are concerned.

Repercussions of Widowers' Treatment

Taking part in mourning rituals often serves as an important rite of passage with both cultural and religious significance. It is considered as a growing experience since it marks the time in our lives when we face and cope with the reality of death. Participating in mourning rituals and practices, especially funerals, entails the dignified and respectful care of the

deceased. It allows people to feel a sense of closure as it appears in this excerpt: “Oh Dora, the hand that gave, is now withdrawn and can we ever find such a cheerful giver? To me I have lost a mother and a sister. Oh, my counsel is gone” (p. 276-277). Boateng shows the place that his wife Dora occupied in his life when she was alive. He now says things that he could not tell her in her lifetime. He gives voice to his feelings that he loved her so much and that he terribly misses her. Far from being a tribulation, this is an important and commendable aspect of the mourning rituals.

Despite the benefits that mourning rituals and practices provide, the living often avoid them. This is due to the fear associated with them insofar as they entail the waste of time and the wastage of money. When death occurs, the bereaved family and the whole community have to respect a stipulated period of mourning. This period lasts forty days and nights. The widower and the other bereaved members of the community are expected to stay at home during this period. This includes the cessation of all economic activities during the forty days and nights of rituals. Boateng is a prosperous trader who owns a shop managed by his wife. After his wife's death, the shop has been closed because of his status of widower, which seriously affects his economic development. He needs to raise a lot of money for his wife's obsequies; and at the same time, he has to close his shop which is meant to provide him with the necessary funds. This is a paradoxical situation which needs to be revisited for the welfare of widowers. African funerals are open to many visitors. These funerals, and especially the memorial service, may be extremely expensive for the bereaved family. The writer confirms this in the quotation below:

It was customary that when anybody died all the people of Asamang joined the bereaved family to bury the dead and share the funeral expenses, which sometimes stood very high because many kinds of drinks were served and many people were invited from all parts of the country and they came with traditional drums and played them until the dead was buried and all the ceremonies were carried out. These lasted forty days and night. (p. 32)

The above quotation clearly shows that the bereaved family must provide food and drinks for the people who come to mourn with them. Sheep are bought and slaughtered for the *Sora*, and all this includes too much money to spend. African people, especially the Akans of Ghana, suffer from sustained harmful customary practices such as widowhood or widowerhood. As a result, they try to avoid these practices. The novelist justifies this idea when he writes:

Boateng knew of the ritual. This was what he had wanted to avoid when at the hospital he tried to fight Dora back to life. It had been a long fight not for the length of period but for the dismay and anguish that he went through, and all those things were responsible for his behaviour at the hospital when the death of his wife was announced. (p. 37)

Boateng dreads to be a widower because he knows that he will go through a lot of tribulations that stem from his spouse's family, from the society and from tradition. The widower sleeps on a mat on the floor, and he cannot eat twice a day. He also has to walk barefooted during the period of mourning. It is in this

sense that Boateng complains: “I am not weak: the only trouble is my feet. Pain, pain from stones” (p. 184). He shows how much it is hard for him to walk without any sandals. Through this, he shows the difficulties he has been facing during the mourning period. Boateng is so fed up with that he decides to commit suicide in the scrubland before the end of the mourning rituals. Fortunately, a ritualist who is in the vicinity has narrowly saved him. All this reveals Boateng's plight in terms of the violation of social, economic, psychological and human rights. Mourning rituals only lead to the facilitation of grief and does not resolve it, leaving individuals frustrated. Despite all these negative effects of mourning rituals, these legally unacceptable practices persist in many parts of Ghana, especially in the rural areas.

Referring to the huge amount of money spent during funerals, K. Arhin (1994, as cited by Y. Mane, 2020, p. 188) observes that these rites have been transformed into an institution of economic and social achievements, rather than having a religious significance, in response to changes in the economy, society, and material culture of the Akan people over the last century. People tend to take better care of the dead than the living. In other words, they seem more interested in the post-mortem.

As the Akan saying goes, “the family loves the corpse.” In the framework of the novel, it is evident that these ancient ways of mourning become more and more intolerable (Y. Mane, 2020, p. 188). This justifies why Boateng and his mates have decided to have recourse to the Asamang Scholars Association for the reformation of the old and archaic customary practice. If they had been successful, Boateng would have been spared from the ritual (p. 35). It partly aims at seeking the interest of the people of Asamang and helping to promote the development of the town into a modern community as asserted by Taw Atakora, a member of the executive. He goes on to elucidate, in a querulous tone, that the practice of funeral celebration, which he sees as a social vice that all socialists and democrats should keep their hands off, should be eliminated (Y. Mane, 2020, p. 188).

Of course, in A. Konadu's *Ordained by the Oracle*, the bereaved family has to raise a loan for the funeral celebration: “[...] they had entered into another discussion over how to raise a loan of £500 for the funeral celebration” (138). This constitutes a debt to be refunded. It is true that the widower should put part of the money in the coffin to make sure that his deceased wife does not lack money in spirit land and to pay her fare. Seen from that angle, it is clear that money has an expiatory function, which is very good. However, the greater part of it is meant for the daily sustenance of the people who have come to assist the bereaved family throughout the mourning period which lasts forty days. This is an ostentatious aspect of the mourning expenditure. Of course, this adds a lot to the protagonist's tribulations.

Social Support and the Failure of Christianity

Social support is very important in African traditional religion, especially when someone dies in the community. It occurs when people come to assist someone who has lost a loved person. In the novel, after Dora's death, people have not left Boateng alone. His own family, his friends, his wife's relatives and the whole community have come to assist him during the mourning period, especially during the funerals. The following excerpt sums up this fact: “When Madam Dora Boateng died everybody at Asamang and the outlying district came to the funeral, not only for the love and respect they had for her and her family but to

mourn with her husband Kwabena Boateng in that hour of tribulation” (p. 32). So, the people of Asamang have brought their assistance to Boateng when his wife has died. They have assisted him in different ways, including moral assistance, material assistance and financial assistance.

Social support allows people to fulfil their cultural and religious obligations, not only for the deceased but also for the whole community. In Africa, it may bring people together. For instance, in the novel, Dora’s death is an occasion for the people of Asamang and other people to gather and mourn with the bereaved family. The close family members, relatives and friends form a support system, offering their counsel and loving touch. Mourning offers people the opportunity to heal the grief caused by a loved person’s death. Healthy grief means expressing painful thoughts and feelings, and healthy funeral ceremonies allow people just to do that. They are able to express their feelings openly in a safe and supportive environment where such practices are encouraged and perpetuated. So, the social context and the novel under study are inseparable. That is what K. Agyekum (2013, p. 209) means when he writes: “The social milieu is embedded in the works of artists. Indeed, the social context serves as the raw material for the production and understanding of literary works. The social set-up and the institutions in the society at any point in time combine to exert some major influence in the works of the artists.”

In the novel, moral assistance is vividly shown by Boateng’s friends and by his guide, Kofi Amapa. They have offered him their counsel and loving touch. The novelist shows this as follows: “They had all travelled to Asamang when they heard of the death of Dora. They gathered around the car to help Boateng on to his feet” (p. 63). Boateng’s friends have quickly come to Asamang when they have heard that his wife has passed away in order to support their friend during this painful period. Boateng has been lucky to have a responsible and understanding guide, Kofi Amapa, who worries about him and gives him advice when he is lost and disoriented. For example, Kofi Amapa counsels him in these terms: “Don’t say anything that will make the young woman feel she is not wanted. [...]. Mm! It is important. You cannot live with the past all the time” (p. 279). He advises Boateng to let his second wife live her life without making any comparison between her and his deceased wife, Dora.

Material and financial assistance is given to the deceased before the burial and to the relatives of the deceased during the mourning period. People have come with gifts for Dora to help her in her journey to the afterlife. The following quotation is a proof:

We have been friends when you lived. We never travelled without you. That was why I was sorry when you were brought here three days ago and I was told you were dead. Death comes for everyone. But, now that you have died first, it is my duty as a friend to give you a few things to take away like a friend going to on journey, so I have brought you this bottle of schnapps and a piece of cloth and three silver coins to take away with you. The schnapps to drink when you are thirsty; the cloth to wear when you get to your destination; and the coin to help ferry you across the great river. Farewell, my dear Dora. (p. 164-165)

Dora’s friend, Yaa Amadea, has come to show her real affection to her deceased friend through her speech and the gifts she has brought her. Many other donors have come and done the same thing to Dora and to their ancestors through her. It is during the funeral that the donations have increased. Everybody wants to bring his assistance to the bereaved family. The narrator confirms this through the following discussion between Boateng and his guide:

‘We must be in our seats before the place gets crowded. You know that most of the people are coming because of you.’

‘Yes I know. You were there last night when I had a message from Elmina of the various drumming groups who are coming,’ Boateng said.

‘No I was not. Who brought it?’

‘The chief fisherman. He came with two basketfuls of fish to help me look after the guests.’ (p. 220-221)

All these are examples of social support in the mourning period. Social support is an important determinant of grief resolution for the bereaved family. It also helps the bereaved family to pay their debts brought about by expensive funerals.

The responsibility for the mourning rituals of a deceased African who is also a member of the church naturally and legally belongs to the bereaved family or relatives. Unless the deceased has made a will which states otherwise, the family or relatives have the right to decide where and how the corpse should be buried. When Dora has died, a Christian committee has come to meet her people so as to inform them that before her death, she has converted herself to Christianity. So the catechist has said: “‘She requested a Christian funeral and we are not going to have any way of the Satan’ [...]” (p. 74). He treats the traditional mourning rituals and practices as the way of Satan and then decides that Dora should have a Christian funeral. But the people ignore the Christian committee and prepare Dora’s body in their own traditional way. This has created a problem for the Christians. That is why the leader of the church, Osofo Jeremiah, has decided to meet the elders to sympathise with them on the one hand, and to reach a consensus with them on the other hand. Despite the fact that he sees the Akan customs as satanic, and tells Boateng: “We know you are a man of Christ at heart, only the machinations of Satan have held you joining the flock” (p. 135), he has no alternative left but abdicate. “Jeremiah saw he had no chance with the elders, who like Pharaoh of old, were stubborn in their demands” (p. 136). He says: “I came here in the name of the Lord and I am not to give in to quarrels [...]. I have a duty and in the name of God I should carry it out” (p. 138).

Osofo Jeremiah has spoken of his duty which is to give the dead Sister, Dora, a Christian burial. However, the elders have shown him that he is not welcome at all at the funeral. The village chief has retaliated in a proverbial language in these terms: “Then carry it out somewhere. My clan is a parrot with the palm nut in its mouth. We live with fire and not water. Serwaah should not be part of your people who have no culture” (p. 138). The elders have refused the Christians’ participation in the funeral and this has completely closed the opportunity for evangelisation. Africans have an elaborate mourning ceremony because the

condition of the dead in the afterlife is partly determined by the treatment they receive from their family and friends.

As Y. Mane (2022, p. 177) puts it, “The lack of metaphors, allusions, and other fiddly figures of speech and intricate narrative techniques helped to enhance the ethnographic flavour of the novel which undoubtedly aims at rendering as best as possible cultural facts and their symbolic meaning.” This implies that the novel is purely an ethnographic one which has nothing to do with Christianity. A. Konadu is therefore an ethnographer who has faithfully tried his best to show what really happened in the Akan community of Ghana at the time he wrote his novel. “Like an experimental scientist, ‘the novelist is but a recorder who is forbidden to judge and conclude.’ He ‘should equally keep to known facts, to scrupulous study, if he does not wish to stray among lying conclusions’ (H. Meyerhoff, 1960, p. 9). That is what the writer has done through his novel by coming up with genuine conclusions.

Conclusion

This study has dealt with the tribulations inherent in mourning rituals in A. Konadu’s *Ordained by the Oracle* which is set in the Akan community of Ghana. It has examined three sections, namely mourning rituals and practices, widowers’ treatment and its repercussions, and social support and the failure of Christianity. It has pointed out the African traditional religion beliefs and ways of mourning their deceased. Although widowhood considerably reduces male chauvinism in the community depicted in the novel, it has a lot of drawbacks. Apart from the tribulations that it heaps on the widowers, it leads to the waste of time, the wastage of money, and to many other corollaries. The study has found that widowhood as it is practiced in the novel under study is inappropriate and hence needs to be improved through the purging of its bad aspects. The writer has used literary techniques such as proverbs and songs to convey his message. Mourning songs which are an indicator of bereavement appear in mourning rituals and constitute an important factor in the novel. Above all, modern people should be creative. Eradicating long-standing traditional practices does not take place overnight. However, modern people must begin somewhere and that beginning is through information and advocacy that can raise rural people’s awareness and change the climate of their opinion on mourning rituals and practices.

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