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Cultural Practices - Death & Burial

Dear Friends,

In the May article, I talked about the Naming Ceremony of the newborn baby. I talked about the significance of naming the baby after somebody of repute in the family and the role of the elder who does the naming. Then the Pouring of Libation is part of the ceremony to invoke the blessings of the ancestors. The place of the ancestors in the African, particularly, Ghanaian/Akan belief system is so crucial. The Ghanaian/Akan believes that life is a cycle: birth, puberty, marriage, death and burial. This system is based on the fact that man, the human flesh, is composed of three parts: body, soul and spirit.

Death is a universal phenomenon, but for the Ghanaian/Akan, when a relative dies, he or she is believed to have moved on into another existence and therefore hasn't left the tangible world at all. The dead are believed to still be involved in the material and human world, and even to some extent believed to still influence the life and thoughts of those alive. The passing on of a relative is a serious occasion that causes days of mourning to celebrate the life of the deceased.

Christian people in Ghana are also very interested in matters of the dead and involve themselves in matters relating to death. Christians believe in the dead not only regarding the material and human world but also in the hope of the resurrection. Before Christianity came here, our forebears believed life continues beyond the grave. Because of this, sometimes the dead would be buried with items symbolic of how he or she lived on earth. In the past, when a king died, they would kill his most trusted slave and place the slave's head in the coffin, so that in the next world the king would still have a servant to provide services.

Before the facility of the mortuary evolved, our dead were buried within days. In contemporary times, the body will be kept in the morgue for a time of a few weeks to months, even up to a year. Cremation is not a part of our culture, and on occasion, the community elders will strongly oppose any suggestions for it. This does not rule out cremation as an alternative to burial. But in recent times only some have done it for their relatives. In situations where the dead is a king, the actual burial may take more than a year. His successor will have to be chosen and enthroned so he (the successor) will organize resources and ensure a befitting burial for the predecessor.

A lot of preparation, that requires huge sums of money, will go into the efforts to make the burial worthy of the deceased. The cost of the funeral is sometimes levied and shared by family members, with some going to the extent of borrowing from friends and even financial institutions, to finance the ceremony. It is ridiculous to think of, but suffice to say some incur debts which take years to pay off.

There is no one like a professional undertaker organizing the funeral. The family members assume full responsibility after removing the body from the morgue to make it ready for burial. The body will be laid in state the night before, to allow family members and friends to come and bid 'farewell' to the deceased. If the deceased was a Christian, the church choir or organization will perform a vigil, singing hymns and other gospel songs to console the family. Before the body is taken to the church for the burial service the next day, the deceased's kin would gather around and have a private farewell.

The belief is that the deceased are going to join the ancestors, thus becoming a new ancestor. This is why a befitting burial is both required and well organized. Otherwise, it is believed, that calamity will befall the family and may negatively affect them, for all, or most, of the rest of their lives.

The coffin (casket) is of great importance to prove to the public the social status of the dead. The dead are buried in a public cemetery, which is ideally located on the outskirts of the village or town, sometimes more than a couple of miles. Traditionally black attire is worn for the day of the burial, signifying deep loss. Most burials are done on Saturdays. Nowadays, it is however, becoming the practice to see that the family and friends may be seen to outfit themselves in another textile design (mostly with spotted white colors) to wear for the Sunday service, the day after the burial.

The burial is characterized by the provision of food for the guests, and also entertaining them with music. This comes at a great cost. People sometimes will determine whether or not a funeral was well handled by the bereaved family by the amount of food served and the entertainment that took place. In recent times, churches and other social agents have begun to decry the waste of funds and resources on these elaborate burial ceremonies.

Blessings, Pastor Ben

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