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Introduction

THIS BOOK IS about death, dying and the dead in Africa. Its focus is one region of the continent, encompassed by the present-day nation of Ghana, but through this case study seeks to contribute to an understanding of the history of death more broadly. If the book's geographical frame is restricted, its chronological reach is generous, extending over some four centuries, from around 1600 to the 1950s. Indeed, the use of Ghana as a case study was in part determined by a desire to think about changing perceptions, experiences and cultures of mortality in Africa over as long a period as possible. While the dearth of sources for much of the continent south of the Sahara presents formidable challenges to the writing of this sort of cultural history, the region first encountered by European mariners in the 1470s and dubbed by them the Gold Coast offers at least a possibility to do so. A two-hundred-mile stretch of West Africa's Atlantic littoral, the Gold Coast and its tropical forest hinterland was dominated by a people who would emerge as one of the most prominent of the continent's diverse state-builders: the Akan. Responding to global demand first for gold and then for slaves, the Akan and their neighbours mobilized commercial wealth to create a sequence of centralized kingdoms and a sophisticated political culture. These processes culminated in the rise at the start of the eighteenth century of the great forest kingdom of Asante, which dominated the region until its eclipse by British imperialism in the 1890s. This long history of encounter and creativity is fundamental to the project of writing about death across the divide between the precolonial and colonial eras of African history. Not only did it shape one of the continent's most vibrant mortuary cultures; it gave rise to a rich array of oral and written sources which enables something of that culture to be reconstructed.

My interest in death and in the relationship between the living and the dead in West Africa was fashioned by a variety of factors. I had encountered death

as a force shaping culture and social change in the course of previous research on the history of Ghana: in the nation's capital city, Accra, where the British colonial regime had first intervened into established practices of burying the dead, and, on a broader canvas, in the emergence over the first half of the twentieth century of popular healing movements which responded to a perceived crisis in mortality by combating the malign forces threatening wellbeing and social cohesion.[1] Yet it was stories of the dead, the dying and the bereaved in creative writing and in music from beyond Ghana which inspired me to consider if such accounts might be excavated from records of the African past. I am thinking here of novels such as William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), in which episodes in the death and burial of Addie Bundren are recounted by various members of her family as they cart her body to Jefferson, Mississippi, so that it might be interred among her own people. My title, *In My Time of Dying*, has a similar cadence but is taken from an old gospel-blues refrain sung in a range of versions by African American musicians, none more famously than that recorded in 1927 by the gravel-voiced Texan Blind Willie Johnson as 'Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed'.[2] That and scores of other such recordings from the 78 rpm era also triggered my curiosity about the ways in which ordinary folk over time and across cultures have struggled (and as often as not, I suspect, failed) to make sense of their own and others' mortality. Did traces of a particular West African attitude towards the ends of life—an apparent ability to stare death squarely in the face—somehow survive the horrors of the Middle Passage and enslavement to resurface in these haunting blues songs? Perhaps—although a similar steely-eyed vision can be heard in other genres of folk music, such as the Appalachian murder ballad (also drenched in death, but rooted in the ancient bardic traditions of the British Isles).[3] Be that as it may, these scratchy old recordings in which the spectre of death seems ever present drew me to similarly introspective meditations on mortality from West Africa: to the funeral dirges and instrumental mourning music of the Akan and their neighbours and, through that haunting soundscape, to the dead themselves.[4]

A second inspiration was the sheer ubiquity in contemporary Ghana of the funeral as a dazzling and very public celebration of the dead. If historically in West Africa mortuary rituals were often the most important of all rites of passage, then this remains the case today: over much of Ghana, Saturday is funeral day.[5] From the congested centres of the country's modern cities to isolated rural communities, the bereaved, immediately discernible by their distinctive funeral cloth and by the noisy entanglement of grief and celebration, are

everywhere visible. Walls of buildings are typically plastered with obituary notices, bearing portraits of the deceased and headlined with statements reflecting abiding ideas about the distinction between a good and bad death: 'Call to Glory' or 'Celebration of Life' for those who died at an advanced age, for example; 'Gone Too Soon' or 'What a Shock!' for those who did not. The exuberance of Africa's modern funerary cultures is perhaps nowhere more emblematic than in the famous designer coffins of the Ga people of Accra: the brilliantly conceived and brightly painted animal-, vegetable-, fish-, automobile-, tool-, Bible-, pen- and even beer-bottle-shaped receptacles for the dead, which first appeared in the 1950s and now grace art galleries and museums in the West. In Ghana today, as in Africa more broadly, funerals are important and the dead are all around. Whether taking the form of mortal remains, of hallowed ancestors, of spectral revenants or of memories, they continue to cohabit intimately with the living. If what Robert Pogue Harrison terms the 'dominion of the dead' has been of supreme historical importance to Western civilization, then so too has it been to that of Africa.[6] To borrow a concept from another insightful recent book, Thomas W. Laqueur's *The Work of the Dead*, the African dead continue to have much cultural work to do.[7] What that work is and how it has developed over the centuries lies at the heart of this book.

Long a concern of theological, philosophical and, from the nineteenth century, sociological and anthropological inquiry, death was not given sustained historical treatment until the 1960s, when French scholars of the Annales school began to consider how attitudes to mortality might serve as indicators of broader social change in early modern Europe.[8] The best known of these scholars in the anglophone world was Philippe Ariès, whose *Western Attitudes toward Death* (1974) and subsequent *The Hour of Our Death* (1981) set out a grand narrative in which death's long-established intimacy with the living shifted to its being rejected, sequestered and denied in the modern world.[9] Much subsequent scholarship has taken as a starting point Ariès's thesis on what he considered to be the unhealthy 'denial of death' in post-Enlightenment Europe. In an era increasingly suspicious of grand narratives, this thesis has been widely critiqued by historians seeking to emphasize more nuanced patterns of continuity and change in the care of the dead.[10] Others looking beyond modern Europe, however, have been less critical, including Jan Assmann,

whose analysis of the conceptual world of ancient Egyptian mortuary culture stands as perhaps the finest historical study of death in Africa:

> When it comes to the importance of death, [Egypt] is admittedly an extreme example. But this has largely to do with the fact that that we view ancient Egypt from the standpoint of a culture that is equally extreme, but in the opposite direction. From the point of view of comparative anthropology, it is we, not the ancient Egyptians, who are the exception. Few cultures in this world exclude death and the dead from their reality as radically as we do. Living with the dead and with death is one of the most normal manifestations of human culture, and it presumably lies at the heart of the stuff of human existence.[11]

That said, if the recent boom in the study and portrayal of death is anything to go by, it is perhaps less of a taboo in the contemporary world than previously thought. Suddenly, from scholarly writing and museum exhibitions to artistic production and popular culture, reflection on death and the ends of life seems to be everywhere.[12] Journals such as *Death Studies*, *Omega* and *Mortality* publish a range of transdisciplinary research, while popular histories and ethnographies cater to a general readership interested, as one contribution puts it, in 'how humans invented death'.[13] Meanwhile, a burgeoning academic literature seeks to extend our understanding of the history of death beyond its initial focus on a somewhat normative 'Western culture'—which has often meant France and Britain. From China and Japan to the world of early Islam, from Russia to Mexico, death is emerging at the cutting-edge of historical research.[14] In recent years this work has encompassed the early modern Atlantic world, and it is here, in the zone of cross-cultural encounter forged by the violence of conquest and the slave trade, that the ranks of the nameless West African dead have begun to come into focus.[15]

In Africa itself, death is also emerging as a topic of scholarly concern. Prompted in part by the existential threat of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, by the shifting worldviews associated with the expansion of new forms of Christianity and by the striking prominence of mortuary cultures, this literature has begun to explore the continent's contemporary 'deathways' and 'necrogeographies'. The funeral as a site both of sociability and of contest has emerged as one key area of interest. So too have the impact of biomedicine on registers of morbidity and mortality; the shifting terrain of grief, loss and mourning; and, to borrow Katherine Verdery's term, the political life of dead bodies.[16] If Verdery's widely cited book on southeastern Europe examines the meaning

of mortal remains in a context of post-socialist change, then much of this recent work on Africa is similarly located in a specific political context: that of the postcolony, or, even more specifically, that of neo-liberal Africa in its contemporary 'post-postcolonial' moment.[17] It is, that is to say, mostly anthropological rather than historical, with only a limited sense that apparent transformations in contemporary cultures of death might be part of deeper patterns stretching to the colonial era and beyond, to the precolonial past.[18]

Mortuary rites and the veneration of ancestors became, of course, stock-in-trade concerns of colonial-era anthropology in Africa. Research on the societies of the northern savanna frontiers of the British-ruled Gold Coast is prominent in these fields, notably that by Meyer Fortes and by Jack Goody, whose *Death, Property and the Ancestors* (1962) would influence the pioneering generation of historians of death in Europe.[19] In present-day Ghana, mortuary practices continue to attract the gaze of anthropologists, resulting in an extensive body of work on the cultures, the politics and, above all, the economics of the contemporary funeral.[20] As in the rest of the continent, however, there has been little in the way of sustained historical thinking about the dominion of the dead.[21] It is this gap in our historical understanding that *In My Time of Dying* seeks to address.

As in the West, contemporary creative arts in Ghana have also begun to engage with death, dying and the dead. In 2014, while I was conducting archival research for this book, Accra's annual Chale Wote street-art festival took as its theme 'Death: An Eternal Dream into Limitless Rebirth'. 'Why death?' the festival programme asked. 'It surrounds us in Ghana. Funerals every weekend are important social affairs. Obituary portraits hang on buildings, walls, and gates across the country. In fact, ethnic groups across Ghana possess a wealth of stories about death that are passed privately from generation to generation through family accounts.'[22] The written historical record too has much to say on the matter, yet the stories it tells are often discordant and unsettling. While the ubiquity of the dead suggests that the region has charted a different trajectory than that of the 'death-denying' twentieth-century West, this history is not simply one of some indomitable spirit in the face of mortality. Rather than hallowed ancestors being simply benevolent guardians of community wellbeing, there is every indication that their presence—like the generations of the dead famously described by Karl Marx at the opening of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*—weighed heavily upon the mind of the living.[23]

None of this is to argue that death, in Africa or beyond, necessarily has what can be recognized as a coherent historical narrative. Writing a cultural history of death, I have found, is a bit like writing a history of 'life': like the dead, it is everywhere but nowhere—the invisible, looming antimatter of human existence. 'Our awareness of death and the dead stands at the edge of culture', Laqueur has cautioned. 'As such they may not have a history in the usual sense but only more and more iterations, endless and infinitely varied, that we shape into an engagement with the past and the future.'[24] This illusiveness is compounded by the difficulties in extracting thought, belief or, to use the Annales term, *mentalité* from historical sources, whether texts, oral traditions, embodied practices or material remains. Dead bodies and the beings that have vacated them evoke awe, uncertainty and fear, Verdery argues, but she does not regard 'these cosmic conceptions strictly as "ideas", in the cognitive realm alone. Rather, they are inseparable from action in the world—they are beliefs and ideas materialized as action'.[25] These ideas may not have a linear history 'in the usual sense'—but they are, I hope to show, historical. That said, the profound nature of such conceptions, Peter Brown has pointed out, contribute too to the fact that burial customs 'are among the most notoriously stable aspects of human culture'.[26] Moreover, Brown writes of Roman North Africa in a more recent work, 'the dead were everywhere, but only very few are now visible to us. Nothing reveals more harshly the stratified nature of ancient societies than the utter silence of the vast majority of the dead'.[27] Perhaps, when push comes to shove, it is fictional writing and the lapidary statements of our old bluesmen and women which are better placed than historical analysis to confront the silence and the void.[28]

It is with these challenges in mind that I have chosen to structure *In My Time of Dying* in nineteen short chapters, encompassing a diverse range of themes in the study of death and the dead. The sequence of topics has a broad chronological thrust, from the era of the Atlantic slave trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to that of so-called legitimate commerce and creeping British imperial expansion on the Gold Coast in the nineteenth century and on to the period of colonial rule in the first half of the twentieth century. At that point my material dovetails into the corpus of anthropological work on Ghana's postcolonial deathways. This shifting economic and political frame certainly impacted upon the dominion of the dead. Yet I have sought to keep it in the background, in an attempt to escape the tendency, still apparent in much scholarly writing on Africa, to privilege the continent's encounter with Europe as the principal dynamic of its modern history. Like the recent book

by Kwasi Konadu on one part of the diverse Akan world—a work which, tellingly, opens with an account of the funeral of its protagonist—the emphasis is on how African historical actors themselves sought to manage death, in 'our own way, in this part of the world'.[29] The result is therefore not a linear narrative: a number of chapters focus on a discrete episode—on Verdery's 'beliefs and ideas materialized as action'—but then slip their temporal moorings in order to consider how that particular aspect of mortuary culture may have unfolded over time.

Neither is it an account of all the unpleasant ways that people died in the past—although one chapter is about human sacrifice, another is about poison, while another considers changes in epidemiology in the twentieth century. Other themes include the abiding symbolic power of mortal remains, the remembrance of the dead who were hallowed and the problem of dealing with those whose who were not. A crucial historical thread emerging from the mid-nineteenth century is the effort to manage African death by an unstable coalition of the British colonial state, Christian missions, reformist local elites and the regime of biomedicine. These self-appointed representatives of modernity together mounted an assault on established forms of mortuary practice deemed outdated or unacceptable: ritual immolation; house burial; and the profane treatment of the corpses of witches, slaves and those, such as women who died in childbirth, deemed to have died a bad death. Despite the silences noted above, the documentary residue of this bureaucratic project—'the colonial archive'—combined with a precocious African-owned press, provides a relatively rich range of sources. Entangled with these processes were shifting perceptions of the afterlife and the meaning of death associated with the eschatology of Christian missions. For many Ghanaians, by the era of regained sovereignty in the 1950s—and increasingly so today—it was indeed Jesus who would make up their dying bed.

Many of these historical processes are explored with a particular emphasis on the dominant Akan culture of present-day southern Ghana. Others are not, looking instead to the Ga and other non-Akan-speaking peoples of the country's southeast, to the Gur-speaking peoples of the northern savanna region or to the polyglot urban cultures of the trading towns of the Gold Coast. The distinction is often due to the availability of historical evidence. Yet the absence of quotation marks around 'Akan' or any of these identities should not be taken to imply, despite the comments in the Chale Wote festival programme, that they form clearly defined, unitary 'ethnic groups' bound together by language, territory, kinship norms or religious belief and practice. [30] Within

the extensive domains of Asante, in particular, considerable regional diversity is apparent, and on or beyond Asante's frontiers lay other Akan and Bono kingdoms whose identity was in part shaped by resistance to its imperial ambitions. Neither does it suggest that these linguistic or political communities today are necessarily the linear inheritors of the mortuary cultures which can be glimpsed in oral histories and the documentary record of the opening era of Atlantic encounter. Rather, the argument is that mortuary cultures were themselves key elements in the historical fashioning of identity—including that of the Akan world and its diverse political entities. The cultural work of the dead, that is to say, was directed towards the creation and the maintenance of the world of the living.

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