

Greetings from Ghana #32
The Dearly Departed Are Departing Dearly

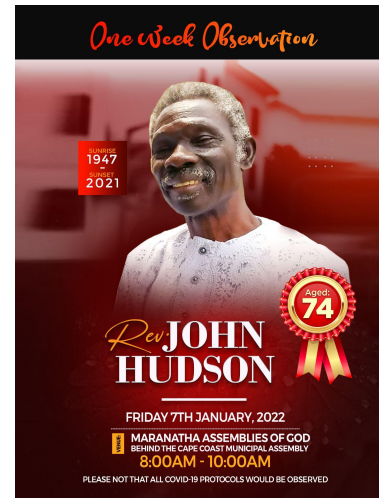
"It will happen to all of us that at some point you'll get tapped on the shoulder and told, not just that the party is over, but slightly worse: the party's going on but you have to leave. And it's going on without you." *Christopher Hitchens*

Woody Allen said, "It is not that I am afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens."

And it was Morrie Schwartz who penned, "Death ends a life but not a relationship." And it is perhaps that phrase that best describes the funeral practices of people in Accra. (I say "people in Accra" because I have yet to see any funerals in other parts of the country).

Accra is a city of 2,660,000 people with an estimated death rate of 20,482 people a year and like the business of religion here, the funeral industry operates with grandeur rarely seen elsewhere in life. Births do not match it. Neither do weddings, although they do come close. Nope, for a party the likes of which few others can imagine, nothing beats a funeral. As a friend of mine put it, "The bigger you were in life, the bigger party you'll have going out."

In the U.S., as you know, we have obituary announcements. Here people put up billboards, banners, and fliers.



And that, as they say, is just the beginning.

The funeral ceremony is somewhat similar to the customs in the U.S., although there may be a few months (or more) between the death of the dearly departed and the service. In the interim the body is kept in cold storage while the family sorts through the details.

Once it is determined when and where the funeral will be, there is an announcement by flier, email, and banner. The person's house is often decorated with black and red bunting with a banner announcing the details. The services are held on multiple days and invitations are sent out to all concerned. People also invite their friends and acquaintances to attend.

The funeral service can last for hours with music and speeches. At at least one period in the service, people will get up and file past the coffin and contribute to a jar or box near the coffin to help offset the funeral cost.

When the service is over, the coffin is transported to the cemetery. Oh and what a transport.

If you are attending the funeral you may be surprised to see the casket picked up by the base. This is because in many cases the handles are strictly ornamental. To try and carry the coffin by its handles would lead to certain mishap and embarrassment. The coffins look as ornate as one might think but it is a decidedly rare service that is expensive enough to warrant a casket with real handles.

Coffins run \$2000 - \$10,000. The average funeral runs about \$9,000 with the transport, documents, labor, mortuary fees, and burial space taking up \$4,000 - \$5,000 of that tab. Bear in mind that the family is judged by the lavishness of the service and no detail is too small to be considered.

There is a company here that will transport your beloved with style and dance. Family members are asked as they are deciding on service details if they would like a traditional service or would they prefer their family member to be "danced to heaven." Being danced can add another \$1400 to the cost of the service.

It was an idea started by one man who performed it for his own family and discovered people liked the idea. He now employs a troop of 100 people in teams to

dance with the casket as it is moved to the cemetery and then to its plot.



His company's claim to fame is that unlike his competitors. . .



they have never dropped one. The company is so successful there was a ten episode reality show created to illustrate funerals that featured the dancing pallbearers.



And yes, you can see the trailer on YouTube.

Funerals are big business here because family bonds are quite strong. It is also not uncommon to see fliers, banners, and billboards announcing the anniversary of someone's passing. It may be something as simple as a banner on the exterior wall of a property where the family resides and the deceased lived. Or it could be a massive billboard facing one of the major motorways if they were a corporate CEO or major political figure.

The emotions of loss are universal but the celebration of a life and the passing of the person here are a grand announcement to all who will notice.