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Traditional Funeral Rites and Health-risk: A Lived Experiences among Dagaabas in Jirapa Area, Ghana

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Abstract:

This case study examines the health concerns connected with the celebration of funeral rites among Dagaabas in Jirapa, Ghana. Through extensive in-depth interviews and participant observations, the study revealed that the rituals performed at funeral celebrations predisposes the celebrants to the risk of health outcomes. The corpse is touched severally by mourners without using protective clothes. Other rituals, such as the food stuff, cooking utensils and the regalia that are displayed beside the corpse which symbolizes items to be taken to the next world – “Dapare” are returned after the burial and expended by the family without being disinfected. The food stuff placed by the corpse are also consumed by the undertakers after the burial. The excessive handshakes and persistent hugs connoting friendship and unity were found to be among the predisposing factors.

Keywords: *Death, traditional, funeral rites, health*

1. Introduction

As a person moves through the life cycle, certain points, such as birth, puberty, marriage and death mark significant changes in the person's life. These points frequently become the occasion for ceremonies known as rites of passage. Funeral rites, one of the rites of passage, is celebrated by every tribe or group of people the world over in accordance with the cultural practices passed to them by their forbearers. Thus, in many cultures of the world, funeral rites and celebrations are held to bid the deceased a farewell to the world of the dead. In the case of the Dagaaba, the belief in life after death makes these funeral rites even more crucial as it is believed that these rites do purify the deceased on his or her journey to the ancestral world (Nuolabong, 2013; Gbal, 2013; Woma, 2012; Gyekye, 1996).

According to Gbal (2013), death is universal; it facilitates the exit of all humankind out of the world. Death is seen as a necessary phase in the perpetual cycle of existence of humankind. Death is an inevitable reality of the human life. From the moment a person is born he/she is at the mercy of the reality of death. Death therefore marks the departing stage of one's life from this physical world to another called the spirit world.

The corpse must be disposed-off. In some cultures it is cremated while in other cultures the dead is buried. In Ghana, the dead is accorded a befitting burial using diverse customary rites. These customary rites mark the belief systems of the individual tribes in the country Ghana (Nuolabong, 2013). Thus, funeral rites accompanying the act of disposing-off dead bodies amongst the Dagaaba in the Jirapa Area are termed, “Traditional Funeral Rites.” It has been observed that certain aspects of the Traditional Funeral Rites amongst the Dagaaba in the Jirapa Area, in the Upper West Region of Ghana are a health-risk to the living. This survey therefore has examined the human health-risk associated with the performance of Traditional Funeral Rites of the Dagaaba within the context of Jirapa Area in the Upper West Region, Ghana.

2. Methodology

2.1. Territorial Space of Dagaaba

As depicted in the Table 1, the Dagaaba is the largest ethnic group in the Upper West Region, Ghana. In The Dagaaba occupies five Districts in the region namely: Jirapa, Lawra, Nandom, Nadowli/Kaleo and Issa/Daffiama Districts respective. However, a great number of the Dagaaba are living in the Wa Municipal, Wa East, and Wa West Districts respectively. Many Dagaaba also occupy the Lambussie/Karni District as members of the Jirapa Area (Nuolabong, 2013; Kpieta and Bonye 2011; GSS, 2010 Housing and Population Census Report). The spatial concordance of the Dagaaba People in the Upper West Region also shown in Fig 1.

Population by Districts	2000 Census Population Figures	2010 Census Figures	Share of district population (%)
Jirapa/Lambusie	96,834	88,402	12.6
Lambussie/Karni		51,654	7.4
Lawra	87,525	100,929	14.4
Nadowli	82,716	94,388	13.4
Sissala East	85,442	56,526	8.1
Sissala West		49,573	7.1
Wa East	224,066	72,074	10.3
Wa Municipal		107,214	15.3
Wa West		81,348	11.6
Upper West Region	576,583	702,110	100.0

Table 1: Population of UWR in 2000 and 2010 Population Census Report
 Source: Ghana Statistical Service, 2010 Population and Housing Census



Figure 1: Areas with Majority of Dagaaba Residents in the Upper West Region
 Source: Kpieta and Bonye, 2011

The Dagaaba people (singular Daga) as an ethnic group are not only in Ghana but other West African nations such as Burkina Faso and La Cote D’Ivoire. They speak the Dagaare language, made up of the related Northern Dagaare language, Southern Dagaare language, a number of sub dialects. They are related to the Birifor people and the Dagaare Diola. The language is collectively known as Dagaare (also spelled Dagaare, Dagari, Dgarti, Dagaran, Dagara or, Daga). One historian, describing the former usage of "Dagarti" to refer to this community by colonials, writes: "The name 'Dagarti' appears to have been coined by the first Europeans to visit the region, from the vernacular root *dagaa*. Correctly 'Dagari' is the name of the language, 'Dagaaba' or 'Dagara' that of the people, and 'Dagaw' or 'Dagawie' that of the land" (Woma 2012; Kpieta and Bonye, 2011). According to Woma (2012), the demarcation of colonial borders has divided the Dagaaba/Dagara people in their geo-space into three countries – northwestern Ghana, southern Burkina Faso and northeastern Cote d’Ivoire. There are three linguistic sub-dialects of the Dagaaba/Dagara in the Upper West Region; these consist of the Dagara in the northwest corner of the region occupying the Nandom area, the Dagaaba in the center-east occupying Jirapa, Nadowli/Kaleo and Daffiama areas and the Losaalæ in the southwest corner who also occupy Lawra and Babili areas. There are clear variations in the spoken language and terminology of the various Dagara, Dagaare, and Losaalæ dialects. Thus, this study uses the Dagaare terminology.

The combined population of the Northern and Southern Dagaare speakers, was estimated in 2003 at over one million spread across the Northwest corner of Ghana and sub-Quest Region in Southern Burkina Faso. The Southern Dagaabe are a people of around 700,000 living in the western part of Upper West Region of Ghana. The Northern Dagaare speakers, with an estimated population of 388,000 (in 2001) live primarily in Ioba Province, but also in Poni, Bougouriba, Sissili, and Mouhoun provinces (Gbal, 2013; Woma, 2012; Kpieta

and Bonye, 2011). In Ghana, several waves of internal migration, beginning in at least the late 19th century and spiking in the 1980s, have brought a sizeable Dagaaba population to towns in the southern part of the nation; notably Brong Ahafo Region where 115,900 Dagaaba domicile and 45,998 also lived in Ashanti region (Kpieta and Bonye 2011; 2000 Housing and Population Census). The larger communities of Dagaaba in the Upper West Region are Kaleo, Nadowli, Jirapa, Lawra, Nandom, Hamile and Han. Some other large communities are also found in the Wa Municipal, Wa West District and the Tuna/Kalba District of the Northern Region.

According to Gbal (2013), the Dagaaba also called Dagara in the Nandom area has developed some cultural traits which are quite different from the others and this is manifested in their funeral rites, marriage customs, music and dance. These differences are influenced by conversion from the ancestral religion called, "African Traditional Religion" to Christianity or Islam, and also their spatial concordance. The spoken language is having a clear mark of distinct words and accent. From the Wa Municipal through to Nardoli/Kaleo District, Issa/Daffiama District and the Jirapa District has same spoken words and ascent. However, Lawra and Nandom Districts also have same accent and spoken words. The Dagaaba in Lawra and Nandom areas are called 'Dagara' and the spoken language is also known as 'Dagara'. While in the Jirapa, Nadowli, Daffiama/Issa and some parts of Wa Areas they are called 'Dagaaba' and the spoken Language is called 'Dagaare'.

As indicated by Gbal, (2013), many African people do not have historical records of ancestry and place of origin. However, McCoy (1988) gave a glimpse of the migration of the Dagaaba from Dagbom to Jirapa Area. Nuolabong (2013) has detail the origin of the Dagaaba/Dagara tracing it from their pre-historical origin back to the Dagomba or Dagbon one of the major tribes in the Northern Ghana. He indicated that the Dagaaba/Dagara broke away from the Dagomba between 1476 and 1492 and moved westwards. These dates are linked with the civil wars and revolts in Dagomba history which created the conditions for the Dagaaba/Dagara to break away from their parent body. As Bekye (1998) puts it: "Calculating from the period of Naa Nyageses's reign, between 1476 and 1492, when the revolt took place, it is assumed that by 1493, the breakaway Mole-speaking Dagomba elements would have settled in their newly acquired homeland. To distinguish themselves from their breakaway brothers, those who remained called these others 'Black Dagomba', but they referred to themselves as Dagaaba/Dagara. According to Gbal (2013) and Nuolabong (2013), the Black Dagombas might have moved from their original homeland Dagbon between the period 1480 and 1550. The Dagaaba/Dagara currently occupying the towns and villages in Wa Area, Nadowli, Issa/Daffiama, Jirapa, Lawra, and Nandom Districts respectively are thus considered as Dagombas. Across the border between Ghana and Burkina Faso the Dagaaba/Dagara occupy towns like Dissin, Wassa, and Maria Tange.

The Jirapa Area which is the focus of this study is currently occupied mainly by Dagaaba in the Upper West Region of Ghana. The Jirapa Area lies in the North Western part of the region extending from Kpari in the North to Bazu in the South and from Orefan in the West to Han-Nindow in the East. Jirapa is one of the largest District Capital Towns in the Upper West Region of Ghana. The Jirapa Area lies between latitude 6.35°N and longitude 1.30°W. The area experiences moderate temperature and humidity and a single rainfall regime, from June to early October - 214.3mm in June and 165.2mm in September (Jirapa District Assembly Medium Term Development Plan 200...). It has a population of 88,402 (2010 Population and Housing Census Reports) and a distance of 62km away from Wa, the Regional Capital. The Jirapa Area is made up of towns such as; Jirapa, Ullo, Tizza, Duori, Tuggo, Gbare, Sabuli and Han amongst other towns and villages (Outdooing of Naa Ansoleh Ganaa II, 2007).

2.2. Data Collection Methods

Cohen et al. (2007), refers to methods of data collection as the various approaches used to gather data which becomes the basis for interpretation and prediction. The study is purely using the qualitative method of data collection thus making it a qualitative study. Qualitative research is used to explore and understand people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behaviour and interactions. It generates non-numerical data. Qualitative research techniques such as focus group discussions and key informant interviews and participant observation were some of the interview techniques used. Some community elders and funeral undertakers in the study area were interviewed as key informants using key informant interview guide. The researcher participated in several funeral rites in the area where key funeral rites were observed. However, some of the funeral rites are so much shrouded with secrecy that it is mostly the elders and the undertakers who are fully initiated into the mystery aspect of funeral rites that are allowed to participate. This serves as a great challenge to research into the complete world view of the dead amongst the 'Dagaaba' people in general. For example, the mystery food that is prepared for young children that are taken through the ritual of entering a tomb is forbidden to be disclosed to any person by the initiates. Also, non-initiators will not be permitted to enter the 'dark-room' in the ancestral home called "Yikpong" unless a man who is initiated and also has not circumcised the foreskin. A circumcised man is termed an incomplete and an unclean man, he will never be the "Tengang-zu Sobo" - the elder who holds the knife and performs all sacrifices to the ancestors and the 'Tengan-zu' - the Land god (Kpieta and Bonye, 2011). As indicated by Gbal (2013), even those who would dare to talk about it would want to receive strict assurance that the discussion will not be made public. Though this is a real challenge to researchers, I was able to research into this area because I was one time initiated as a young person into the lower level of ancestral religion. That position of trust from the elders enabled me undertake this study.

The interviews covered themes on the performance of funeral rites, as well as their detailed knowledge about parasitic and infectious diseases. Secondly, six focus group discussions were held with male (elders) discussants at six sampled communities in the Jirapa area. This approach is deemed appropriate when the object of the research is to explore attitudes or reactions of a group or community in response to some commonly experienced aspects of their belief systems. Through such interactive discourses, participants were able to offer insights on the perspective of the community, revealing clues to the social contexts that shape their opinions (Saleh, 2002). Each focus group had between seven and ten elders who were the discussants. Issues discussed during the FGDs included the question of how the 'Dagaaba' funeral rites are performed. The knowledge of infectious diseases and other possible ways of a person

contracting a disease from a dead body were discussed. All the proceedings, which were mainly in the local language “Dagaare”, were recorded and later transcribed, analysed and organized around the key themes. Also, the scenes at the various funeral grounds were critically observed by personal participation and captured using digital cameras.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Announcing the Death of a Family Member by the Clan Head

Death as the belief system of the Dagaaba as indicated by a key informant is a transition from the land of the living to the land of the dead called “Dapare”. The dead in the family (ancestors) are called “Daparee” or “Kpinne”. As stated by a discussant at the Male FGD, Jirapa-Tampoe:

- “The ancestors (Daparee) have a major say and role to play in the life of the living. The dead (Kpinne) are consulted before and after the burial of a family member. The elders will usually consult their ancestors (Kpinne) through soothsaying, upon the death of a family member to determine the cause of the death, and the type of sacrifices to perform before the funeral rites begins” (Male FGD, Jirapa-Konkuo January 2016).

As indicated by some key informants and confirmed by discussants’ at the FGDs, the consultation of the ancestors by the elders is called “Nusoroo”. This confirms the findings of Nuolabong (2013) who also found that the elders consult soothsayers to determine the cause of death of a deceased family member. A funeral is called “kuore” and the traditional funeral rites are called “komaale”. Five different funeral rites performance were identified during the field survey in the study area; each of these funeral rites has significant bearing on the type of sacrifices to offer to the gods, the length of time/hours the body may be staged for mourning and the activities that are carried out at the funeral grounds. The funeral rites of the people of Jirapa area are found to include:

1. Komaarong – Celebration of life;
2. Kotuo – Bitter mourning;
3. Kovuoro – a funeral rites without the dead body;
4. Koyara – a funeral rite of an infant;
5. Kuufaa – a funeral rite of a suicide person; and
6. Piikuu – a funeral of a person who died from gunshot, arrow head or thunder.

3.2. Embalment of Dead Bodies in the Study Area

As indicated by an elder (key informant), the modern method of embalming dead bodies is usually done by the few rich families who do deposit their dead bodies in the hospital morgue for some months before performing the funeral rights. He said that poor families don’t preserve their dead bodies in the morgue due to the financial commitment. He stated that:

- “We embalmed our dead bodies by pouring kerosene through the nose or mixing cement with water and pour it slowly through the nose of the dead body. When these mixtures are poured into the body, the corpse is able to lay-in-state between 20 - 30 hours before decomposing.” (An Elder, Jirapa-Konkuo)

The key informant narrated that when an old man or woman dies, the family don’t start mourning immediately; rather consultation is made from soothsayers to find out the type of sacrifice to be offered before the funeral mourning began, before the burial and after the burial. For example, some sacrifices observed at a number of elderly men’s funerals before the mourning began was a dog and a number of fowls, a goat and 3 fowls. As captured in Figure 2, six goats and a number of fowls were sacrifice at Duori. A bull, a number of sheep, goats and several fowls were again observed being sacrificed at an elderly man funeral before the burial in Jirapa-Konkuo. At Tizza the sacrificial animal was a dog, with its legs tied backward and a long pole passed through the legs and two men carried the dog at the ends of the pole. At the sacrifice, the neck of the dog was broken by an elder and then slaughtered and the blood poured in front of the dead body. At another funeral at Konkuo, a red cock was sacrificed before the funeral mourning began. However, no sacrifices were observed during the field survey at funeral rights of women and young persons.

3.3. “Komaarong” - Funeral Rights for an Elderly Man/Woman

The Funeral Rights for an Elderly Man/Woman is called “Komaarong” meaning ‘Celebration of Life.’ After the needed ancestral consultations and sacrifices, the corpse’s head is usually shaved and then the body washed in the courtyard. Same-sex usually will wash and dressed-up the corpse with the best regalia. As narrated by some key informants, the family head (chief mourner) and the elders will then gather in front of the courtyard facing the corpse seated on an arm chair or on the floor with the back to a wall. The chief mourner will shout “*N saa woouoo, woyawo, ye yang wee la yeeeeeeee, ye wee la ka ye kuli ye, yeee*” (my fathers the ancestors called “Daparee”, you have come again; you came and took him/her home). “*Abaareyee, yeeee, te na elawulo ye*”, (it is finished, what shall we do). All the elders and family members will respond to the chief mourner, repeating same words. This will be repeated three times for male and four times for a female. It was explained by key informants that, “*A count of three to a man signifies completeness, braveness, and battle readiness; and a count of four to a woman also signifies completeness and dignity of womanhood.*”

The chief mourner will then sing three dirges with the sounding of the local drum (kuore) for the beginning of a male funeral rite. That of a female, the dirges will be repeated four times. As the chief mourner sings the dirges, other family members of the deceased are observed moving in different directions, some running around the compound, wailing and returning to look at the corpse seated. The deceased family members will then be throwing or showering money on the chief mourner as he sings the dirges given appellation to

their ancestors. While this is on-going the undertakers called 'Bogu-unibo' or 'Saabiiri' will be erecting the stage as shown in Figure 1, for the staging of the dead body for the funeral rites celebration to commence. "Komaarong" is characterized by dancing and feasting. Usually, there is a delayed burial for about 24-30 hours, when an old person dies.

3.4. "Kotuo" - Funeral Rights for a Young Person

The Funeral Rights for a Young Man/Woman is called "Kotuo" – 'Bitter Mourning'. When a young person dies accidentally, the entire bereaved family is thrown into an intense weeping and wailing. The family head does not usually go through the ritual of ancestral consultation and sacrifices before the mourning begins. But for about the space of 1 to 2 hours all the bereaved family members cry uncontrollably, running all around the compound, thus, the name "Kotuo".

As explained by discussants at Tizza Male FGD, it is a type of mourning where in time past mourners run and sometimes hurt themselves; some knock each other down, some faint and others may even attempt to kill themselves with any near weapon. Young men and women from other clans called "Saabiiri" or are therefore required to quickly mobilise themselves and rush to arrest all the bereaved family members and tie a strong leader rope made from the skin of a cow called "Kuoreganaa" on the waist of the bereaved females or the left hand of bereaved males. This is to ensure that a member of the bereaved family do not hurt themselves or even commit suicide. Before the burial preparation, the Saabiiri are mobilized to be around in their numbers to arrest any bereaved family member who may want to harm him/herself. The "Saabiiri" members are therefore required to ensure the safety and welfare of the bereaved family members. It is also their duty to dig the grave and bury the corpse after the period of mourning.

3.5. "Kovuoro" - Funeral without the Dead Body Present

As explained by an elder (key informant) in Jirapa-Deboro, when a family member dies out of the village where the body cannot be conveyed to the hometown for the funeral rites, (e.g. if a person from Jirapa died in Accra, Ghana) the corpse is buried wherever the person died and the dead person's clothes are brought home to the traditional home for the performance of the traditional funeral rites called "Kovuoro". All required sacrifices are performed in the ancestral home; the stage is erected at the family staging ground by the 'Saabiiri' to fulfil all rituals; and a miniature corpse is created with wood and dressed with the dead person clothes and seated up-stage. The dead person's pictures are also hanged on the stage, the funeral rites usually will last between 6 and 12 hours. At the time of burial, a symbolic burial will be conducted; this is where the miniature corpse is carried to a hidden place or the ancestral room (the dark-room) and undressed to signify the end of mourning.

3.6. "Koyara" - An Infant Funeral Rite -

The death of a child or an infant receives a brief mourning from only women. The corpse is quickly buried and the mourning ceases. It is a death without befitting funeral rites called "Koyara". An elder stated (Key Informant) that:

- "We don't perform or allow any proper ritual morning for an infant. If that is done, the dead child will come back again into the world through the same mother and die again. Because the spirit of the dead child will enjoy the funeral rites, thus, it will not want to stay away from the world. It will keep returning into the world through the same mother. We only can stop such children from returning unto the mother by cutting an ear or marking the face before burying it" (Jirapa-Tizza, June 2015)

He further explained that when such children are born later again by the same mother with the original marks given it at the last burial, the child will feel ashamed and will not die again. Such children are called "Liewaabo" – 'a returnee'.

After the burial of an infant or a child, the mother of the dead child is taken to her parents' home to stay with them for one or two weeks, for her relatives to comfort her for the loss of her child and then return her to the husband's house afterwards.

3.7. "Kuufaa" - Bad Death

As explained by an elder (key informant), when a family member commits suicide by hanging, or otherwise, the corpse is buried immediately without following any funeral ritual. The 'Saabiiri' will usually horribly open a tomb or dig a shallow grave and the dead person is buried immediately. This type of death is called "Kuufaa" - which means a bad death. The dead body is usually not accorded a befitting funeral rites and burial. If the suicide act was committed inside the compound it means the house and all its contents are desecrated. All the family members must vacate the house to relocate elsewhere for ritual cleansing of the compound by the elders or a new home is built and the old house demolished.

3.8. Piikuu - funeral of a Person who Died from Gunshot, Arrow Head, Thunder or Drowning

As explained by a key informant at Karni, such deaths require proper consultation from the witch doctors and soothsayers, to establish the cause of the death and the required sacrifices to be offered. He indicated that when all the necessary sacrifices are made, the corpse is buried immediately. Such persons are believed to be separated from ancestors – "Kpime".

4. Laying the Corpse in State

The undertakers "Saabiiri" also called "Bogu-unibo" will usually erect the stage at the popular grounds where all clan members are always laid-in-state, using heavy logs. It was observed severally that the corpse is usually carried shoulder high by one of the undertakers "Bogu-unibo" and followed by some other strong men (Saabiiri); the corpse is then seated on the stage which is about 1.5 metres high as shown in Figure 1. A key informant explained that the stage is raised so high to prevent mourners from touching the dead body except the undertakers.

As captured in Figure 2, it shows two male dead bodies seated up-stage. All manner of cereals, tubers and items are placed on or by the corpse such as yam, guinea corn, groundnuts, millet and maize. A bow and arrows are placed in the hand of these corpses sitting up-stage. A hoe and an axe are hung by the bodies. These items are for the dead man to take along to the next world, the hoe and the seeds are for his farming activities while the bow and arrows or the gun are for his warfare and hunting expeditions. A white and a red cork are tied to the stage as shown in Figure 2, it is for the dead to take along to the land of the ancestors. These fowls are sacrificed before the burial as part of the rituals. Also, Figure 3 shows animal sacrifices before the burial of the two male dead bodies.



Figure 2: Two Dead Bodies (Males) Sitting-on-Stage at Jirapa - Duori
Source: Field Survey, November 2014

Figure 4 also shows a dead female body laid on a decorated down-stage, with beautiful clothes and cooking utensils laid by the corpse. The materials are for the deceased to take along to the ancestral world as her clothes. As the corpse is laid down, mourners were observed holding the corpse and others embracing it while wailing.



Figure 3: Six Goats Sacrificed at Duori Funeral by Elders Before Burial
Source: Field Survey, November 2014.



Figure 4: A Female Dead Body Stage with Clothes and Cooking Utensils – Jirapa Akoro
Source: Field Survey, October 2015.

4.1. The Funeral Ground's Activities

The corpse is seated or laid up the stage as shown in Figure 2 and 4 while the drummers of the xylophone (Gyile), and the traditional drum (Kuore) captured in Figure 5, drum for each group of dirge singers to applaud the ancestors of the bereaved family. The mourners will be circling the drummers and the dead body, the dirge singers and corpse while mourning. Bereaved family members were observed throwing some money to the drummers and dirge singers. All newcomers to the funeral are seen walking or run straight to the stage, look at the corpse, move backward and forward before the corpse, stand for some time and gaze at the corpse and throw some money at the corpse (coins or notes).

As shown in Figure 2, a man (bogu-uuno) is observed picking the monies thrown at the dead bodies. The throwing of money at the corpse as explained by a key informant is to provide the deceased enough money for him/her journey to the next world called 'Dapare'. He stated:

- “In the olden days, when our ancestors did not know this current money, it was the cowries that they used for all their funeral rites and market transactions. But the cowries are not in use again so we use the national currency. The amount of money thrown at a dead body will show how important and dignified the person was. Also, we use it to show our wealth; a rich family will shower more money on their dead than poor families”(Key informant, Jirapa Duori).

A mini-food and drinks market begins immediately as captured in Figure 6. Women quickly will locate the shaded trees less than 50metres away from the stage where the corpse is seated up-stage, and begin to sell cooked food and local beer (Pito) to the mourners. Some butchers were observed also setting-up their selling points and begin to boil the meat right there at the funeral grounds (pork, beef, mutton, dog meat etc.) and serve on top of a small table without a net-covering the meat from flies. People who sell the local dry gin (Akpeteshie) will also compete for the available shaded trees to display their drug (alcohol) for mourners to buy and drink. An average of seven local alcohol (Akpeteshie) selling points under trees was counted across the study area during the field survey at the traditional funeral staging grounds.



Figure 5: Playing the Xylophone and Kuore at a Funeral Jirapa-Naayiri
Source: Field Survey, February, 2016



Figure 6: A Scene at a Funeral Ground at Jirapa-Duori
Source: Field Survey, November 2014

The undertakers are served with a gallon of the dry gin (Akpeteshe) to keep them active to dig the grave, some tubers of yam and cereals are also added to them. The undertakers will usually pick the tubers and cereals placed by the corpse on stage and cook it at the grave site and eat it. While the drummers of the xylophone and the local drum (Kuore), also receive the same gallon of local dry gin (Akpeteshie) from the bereaved family to keep them drumming through the night funeral wake. "Pito" (local beer) is the most commonly served alcohol at the funeral grounds. All visiting mourners to the funeral grounds must be served with Pito by the bereaved family; this is according to tradition.

It was observed during the field survey that corpses were staged for an average of 20 hours before burial. Some of the over-staged dead bodies were observed decomposing while seated up-stage with the body fluid dripping. House flies can be seen on the dead body sucking the fluids. In some cases, a close relative is seen seated or standing by the corpse chasing the flies with a tail or fresh neem tree leaves. The stench or odour becomes unbearable around the funeral grounds in many cases. Meanwhile many of the mourners engage themselves in eating and drinking spree. Shaking of hands and embracing fellow mourner is a social norm showing how they share the grief of dear ones. If one fails to accept a hand shake or embrace it signifies suspicion of the person offering the gesture of witchcraft. It becomes a serious conflict which must be resolved by the elders after the burial.

It was also observed that the corpses were touched by too many people, right from the bathing of the dead body, dressing it, staging and unto the burial. The undertakers (Bogu-unibo) keep climbing up the stage to pick out all monies that are thrown on the corpse and food stuffs that are placed on the stage. Close family members of the dead person occasionally will climb up the stage and hold the corpse while crying. Many of the mourners have such a close contact with the corpse, meanwhile, washing of hands with disinfectants before eating at the grounds is absent. Many mourners were observed eating with unwashed hands just as they will always rinse the hands with water and eat. The same serving items like calabashes/cups and bowls were observed being used in serving the mourners with 'Pito' around without been properly washed. A man is seen in Figure 6 serving people with 'pito' using the same calabash all around without it being washed.

Public toilets and urinals are generally absent in most of the public staging grounds which is usually around the family compound. Mourners keep urinating all around; while others also attend to toilet in the near-by shrubs and behind trees or uncompleted buildings. The environmental setting around the funeral house and the staging grounds is usually observed to be littered with human waste -both solid and liquid.

The family members and other sympathizers normally keep wake at the funeral grounds till the next day. Student type mattresses are rented by the bereaved family for people to sleep on during the wake-keeping. Others sleep on benches and mats to keep wake. It was observed during the field survey at several wake-keeping grounds that fires are set to enable the wake-keepers keep themselves warm through the cold night, while others engage in drinking alcohol and smoking.

5. Preparation for Burial

5.1. "Gandaa Tambo Nu-embo" - Arming the Dead ody

One of the major activity before a male dead body is buried is the arming of the dead person for his journey to 'Dapare'. The elders usually will go into the ancestral sacred room, perform sacred sacrifices and then emerge from the room with a bow and a quiver full of arrows – sometimes with guns inclusive. It was observed during the field survey that the armed elders will circle the dead body three times and stop in front of it. One elder will then climb up to the stage and pick an arrow and the bow and then put it into the hands of the dead body. The gun is also laid on the dead body sitting up-stage. A key informant explained that the departing male

family member is armed for battle on his journey to the next world –‘Dapare’. And also at Dapare he must hunt the wild over there for meals.

After the burial, the bow and the arrows are kept in the ancestral sacred room and upon further ritualistic sacrifices, the departed man is qualified as an ancestor of the living family members which is established by Kpieta and Bonye (2011). However, if the deceased in his life time never gave birth to a male child his bow and three arrows are broken in front of the corpse signifying that his name is cut off from the family and he cannot be an ancestor in the family, this is because there is no male child to continue the family name. That is the reason for male Dagaba to want to ensure that he has a male child even if it will be with a second or a third wife.

5.2. Final Step to the Burial

The undertakers (Bogu-unibo) will then be informed by the elders to go ahead and bury the corpse. The time of burial must either be in the morning or evening time. A key informant explained that they don't bury a dead body when the sun is high, it will mean punishing their dead with heat. During preparation for the burial the undertakers usually undress leaving their underwear. If the corpse is dripping body fluid due to prolonged staging, the undertakers were observed rubbing their whole body with ashes. On many occasion, during the burial of the corpses, one “Bogu-unibo” is observed standing with his back to the corpse sitting up-stage; two strong young men (“Bogu-unibo”) will climb the stage as shown in Figure 2, and shake the corpse, tap it and then lift it to sit on the shoulders of the “Bogu-unibo”. The young man “Bogu-uno” will then hold the corpse on the shoulders and run gently to the grave site or into the ancestral room (sacred room), with the other “Bogu-unibo” closely following behind and the elders. A female (dead) is however carried on a local mat by two young men to the grave site or the sacred room where the corpse is undressed and searched redressed with white garments. Also, some sacred sacrifices are offered to the gods and the ancestors in the ancestral sacred room before the corpse is finally buried in the courtyard, in-front of the compound or behind the family compound. People around Tizza, Douri and Sigrì who are called ‘Gbielome’clan must always carry the dead body into the sacred room and bath the body with ‘Pito’ (locally brewed alcoholic beverage) before the corpse is buried. It was however observed throughout the Jirapa Area that the undertakers – Bogu-unibo don't use any protective clothes when handling a dead body.

5.3. The Grave Site Activities

At the grave site, the undertakers will form a circle around the corpse with a big cover cloth keeping the public out of view of the grave site activities. A key informant explained that the corpse is then undressed of the beautiful regalia and the body searched. If an insect or maggot is found on it means that the decrease was taken away some other family members to “Dapare”. These findings will prompt proper consultation with the ancestors; sacrifices, adding the insects that were found on the dead body, else more family members will die. Afterwards, the corpse is redressed with white clothes provided by the family for burial. It was found out during the survey that it is generally a taboo to bury a corpse with multi-coloursexcept white material clothes. A key informant stated: *“The white material is used in the burial to symbolize peace and righteousness, the soul of the deceased should go in perfect peace; all his sins are forgiven by the living; and that he also must forgive any wrong done to him/her in the family”* (Key informant, Jirapa Sigrì)

The beautiful regalia that are undressed from the decomposing dead body are washed by the Bogu-unibo at any near-by-river, dam/pond or borehole points. The water bodies in which these clothes are washed are polluted. Mostly, these clothes are washed without using detergents or antiseptics. The regalia worn on the corpse at one time was observed being washed at a borehole platforms that serve the community drinking water without any detergents at Jirapa-Tizza. Again, it was commonly observed during the field survey that the young men who carried the corpse for burial do not also wash their hands with any detergent or disinfectant.

5.4. The Absence of Community Cemeteries

It was observed throughout the study area that there are no community cemeteries in the entire Jirapa Area. Most corpses are buried in the courtyard, in front of the compound or behind the compound. Every family do bury their dead at home. Mostly, it is an elder or older women that are buried in the courtyard or in front of the compound while younger people are buried behind the compound. And as the graves are mostly not cemented or marked almost all graves diminishes into farming grounds with the passage of time leaving only the marked tombs. It is very difficult therefore to find a place for burial in case a stranger happens to die in any of the towns in the study area.

6. Kuoreyen Gaabo (Second Wake-keeping)

Discussants at the Male FGD at Tizza, Konkuo and Akoro all indicated that after the burial of the corpse, bereaved family members will sleep outside the house to keep-wake again overnight. Early in the morning they will rise up and start a fresh mourning until around 7:00 am. If the deceased is a man, the wife and children will have their heads shaved between the hours of 5:00am and 6:00am early in the morning during this kind of wake-keeping. The elders will usually send the deceased wife and children to any near-by river or pond and bath them. This symbolically is to wash away the dirt of the man on the wife and the children. Also, the wife is cleansed from the soul of the late husband for subsequent re-marriage in the family after all other rituals are performed on the woman. The children also go through this ritual for the public to know that they are now orphans and need the support of all the clan members. However, this kind of second wake-keeping is abolished in quite a number of the villages and towns but others still practice it. This open wake keeping exposes mourners to increased mosquito bites and increasing incidence of malaria and typhoid fever.

7. “Bogkpiebo” – Entering a Tomb

As explained by some key informants, entering a tomb is a ritual which fortify young people from any harmful effect of accidentally touching a dead body or walking on a fresh grave. During a FGD with some of the undertakers, discussants explained that the ritual of entering the tomb has fortified them from harm and health-risk from dead bodies. Each clan have several tombs in which they bury old men and women. As explained by these key informant, they bury up to ten people in one tomb in an interval of five years. When an old person is to be buried in such a tomb, it is opened and the old bones pushed to a side creating room for the fresh body to be laid. A sacred ritual meal (food) is placed in the tomb.

Entering the tomb ritual therefore is when an elderly man or woman is buried in a tomb overnight; the young boys are selected across the village and are gathered early in the morning at the tomb site. The undertakers will remove the tomb stone, two of the undertakers will enter the tomb; the young boys are passed in batches of 2 or 3 at a time into the tomb. Each young person will be guided by the “Bogu-unibo” in the tomb to how to bury a dead man or woman. Each of the child then eats some of the sacred/ritual food in the tomb with the dead body. Each batch is sent out of the tomb after the ritual, while the next batch of young persons also enter the tomb for the ritual. The boys are then taken to the nearby river after the ritual to take a bath. An elder explained that some further rituals are performed on the children to fortify them against harm. He stated:

- “The ritual food prepared for these young ones consist of a root of a tree that grows into an old tomb. We open the old tomb and cut such a tree root and add millet flour, shea oil and other sacred sacrifice meat” (Key Informant Jirapa-Konkuo, April 2016).

According to the elders, this ritual fortifies the children; and if he/she happen to walk on a fresh grave or touch a dead body, the individual will not suffer from a multiple swollen body called “Bogzie” which kills its victim.

It was revealed during the survey that a male corpse is laid on his left side with the left hand serving as a pillow to the head and the body is laid to the eastern side of the tomb with the face towards the east. While a female corpse is laid on the right side with the right arm serving as a pillow to the head and laid in the western side of the tomb with her face towards the west. The face of the dead man buried towards the east still stand that watch the sun and rise early to the farm while the dead woman is buried with the face towards the west means observe the sunset and prepare supper on time for the ancestors. Significantly, there is a conceptual divide between men and women in the study area. It is not only in life that men are separated from women, even in death, men are separated from women right from the beginning of the funeral rituals up to the burial.

8. Health-Risk of Traditional Funeral Rites of the Dagaabas - Jirapa Area

8.1. The Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework usually serve as a guide to the survey. With regards to this survey, the underpinning theory is the Risk theory. The risk theory is explained using three approaches. They are: the technical or engineering approach to risk; the psychological approach to risk; and the socio-cultural approach to risk. This study has adopted the psychological and socio-cultural approaches to risk in the analysis.

The psychological approached to risk looks at the individual’s cognitive perceptions of risk to explain risk judgement. This approach focuses on the individual attitudes, perspectives, perceptions, behaviours and belief systems that are incorporated in the individual risk judgment. According to Slovic (2000), the way an individual assesses risk, judge and communicate risk are embedded on how risk is perceived. He indicated that the process of risk judgement are based on the quality of information available which enables the individual to make informed decisions as to whether by human intervention risk can be controlled. Again, the theory also identified the qualities of risk that influences an individual decision making to include the knowledge about the risk and the extent to which the risk is known to the individual (Sjöberg, 1998).

The socio-cultural approach to risk also examines risk within the social groupings and their perception and experience about risk. According to Rayner (1992) the socio-cultural approach to risk assessment, risk judgement and how it is communicated are formed from the influence of the socio-cultural groups which is based on the cultural setting of the group. Thus, people response to risk are based on the knowledge and information they have received and risk their own personal behaviour.

The risk theory used in this research shows how the undertakers and mourners at the traditional funeral rites of the Dagaaba in the Jirapa Area either lack information that could influence their judgement on the health-risk of the close association of the living with dead bodies during the funeral rites. The risk theory, as it stand clearly shows how culturally an individual or groups can be at health-risk of infectious diseases as they closely relate with dead bodies.

These cultural practice pass onto the living by their forbearers seems to maladaptive culture. According to Kottak (1991), any cultural practice that turns to be expensive and cause inconvenient or health-risk to people in a society in the course of practicing it is said to be maladaptive. A maladaptive culture benefits fewer people in the society, leaving majority of them suffering as a result of its consequences. The inappropriate handling of corpses and the luxurious traditional funeral rites performed in the study area, as observed by Amoako-Attah (2000), are maladaptive culture, as they have become a health-risk to the living. Despite the inconveniences that go with maladaptive culture, it continues to exist. Maciver and Charles (1996) indicated that maladaptive culture continues to exist due to cultural and economic interests. They argued that people, especially the elderly, who most often happen to be the opinion leaders in a community, do not want to tamper with the bureaucratic customs and taboos left for them by their ancestors. This is because; the principles put in place by their fore-bears are seen and considered as the best. As a result, they tend to oppose the introduction of any new process of doing things. Kottak (1991) rather saw political interest to be the cause of maladaptive cultural

continuity. He argued that, traditional rulers who happen to be the custodians of cultural heritage make sure that members of the community do comply with the rules and regulations of the traditions. They have the belief that, the ancestors could be annoyed with or even throw them out of power should they fail to ensure the continuity of traditional beliefs and customs. The lifestyle of mourners and the undertakers at funeral grounds as found out by this survey has therefore shown that the incidence of infectious and parasitic diseases will continue to increase in the study area and indicated by Worboys (2008) and Barnett and Allan (2006).

As captured in the Ghana Health Service (GHS) Reports - Upper West Region (2002 – 2014), infectious diseases such as Hepatitis B, Tuberculosis (TB), Typhoid fever and Meningitis are amongst the Top Ten Diseases causing morbidity and mortality in the region. This clearly shows that many of the corpses that are inappropriately handled by mourners and undertakers through the traditional funeral rites may have died through one of these infectious diseases. In addition, the manner in which dead bodies are piled on each other in the morgue refrigerator for about three to six month interval before removal for the funeral rites could be a source-point of infection of dead bodies by other infected dead bodies.

Hepatitis B Virus (inflammation of the liver) which is reported as one of the top 10 diseases in the region is caused by a virus found in most human body fluids. Hepatitis B is transmitted sexually, by injection drug use and during pregnancy and delivery. However, HBV is much more spread through non-sexual close contact with each other, sharing of body fluids, communal eating and shaking of hands (Berrnett et al. 2006; Paul et al. 2004; Mackean et al. 1985).

Tuberculosis (TB) also caused by mycobacterium tuberculosis, an acid-fast bacillus (AFB) is another infectious disease. Persons having pulmonary TB aerosolize basilica as droplets of nuclei while talking, coughing or sneezing. When they are inhaled by a new host, depending on the immune system of the victim; infection begins. Typhoid fever which is also amongst the top ten diseases causing morbidity and mortality in the Upper West Region is caused by a bacterium called Salmonella Typhus. The disease is transmitted to its victim by the person drinking water contaminated with the bacteria, eating food with contaminated unwashed hands, and house flies settling on food before being eating by the victim.

Meningitis, the fourth infectious disease amongst the top 10 killer diseases in the region is caused by the inflammation of the membranes surrounding the brain and the spinal cord called the meninges as a result of a bacterial or viral infection. Wide range of bacterial causing meningitis includes Neisseria Meningitides, Meningococcus, Haemophilus and Pneumococcus. Meningitis is very common in the Upper West Region as the region is situated in the Meningitis belt in the African Continent (GHS, Wa 2014).

The staging ground of corpses which is usually a scene of crowded people as captured in Figure 2, Figure 4 and Figure 7 respectively is thus a places where these infectious diseases can easily be transmitted as many of the mourners are illiterate (75.6% adult illiteracy in the Upper West Region – GLSS 2013) and do not have adequate information on infectious diseases, that may influence their judgement and decision making on the risk of contracting these infectious diseases at such crowded funeral grounds.



Figure 7: Overcrowding at a Funeral Rite in Jirapa-Naayiri
Source: Field Survey, 2016.

The environment setting created at the traditional funeral grounds would also facilitate the spread of parasitic and infectious diseases in the study area largely. As it was observed during the field survey, human faeces and urine were littered around the funeral grounds which according to (Philips and Verhasselt, (1994) is a fertile grounds for transmission of infectious diseases.

Another health-risk is the burying of corpses in courtyards, in front of compounds and backyards. It was found out that there are no public cemeteries in the Jirapa Area. Meanwhile the entire population of the study area depends solely on underground water (boreholes) where it is proven that these boreholes water quality and even the dams' reservoirs water quality are compromised in the region (Kpieta and Laari, 2014).

The manner in which dead bodies are handled without protective clothes till it is buried is a catalyst for the spread of infectious diseases in the Jirapa Area. The scene at the staging grounds of the corpses where mourners are observed embracing the corpse, shaking hands, embracing each other, using the same cups and calabashes to drink water and 'Pito'. Also, food stuff, cooking utensils and clothes placed on or by the corpse as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 4, and later these items are used by family members. The

exchange of drinking cups and calabashes as shown in Figure 6 and Figure 7, people eating in groups of 4 to 6 may serve as a channel of transmission of infectious disease; also, eating the food stuff that are placed on staged closed to the corpse are practices that may go a long way to promote the transmission of these infectious diseases.

The prolong staging of corpses in the area (20-30 hours) where crowds of people are observed during the field survey to be sleeping around the corpse during the wake keeping, the excessive consumption of alcoholic beverages through the night wake. These practices are found to be promoting un-protected sexual activities during the night-wake, thus, increasing the risk of the spread of infectious diseases HIV and AIDS and other Sexually Transmitted Diseases (Barnett and Alan (2006). The average retailing points of the local dry gin (Akpeteshi) at funeral grounds was observed at several funeral grounds as 7 stands under the trees. The retailers of these pito (local beer) and local dry gin (Akpeteshi) are always seated under the trees between 50meters to 100metres away from the corpse. However, it is an established fact that alcohol acts as any other general anaesthetic: It depresses the Central Nervous System (CNS). These are periods during alcohol use in which drinking individual appears to function normally but later, when the individual is sober, cannot recall any event that occurred during the period - alcohol-induced blackouts. The drunken person may appear and act rationally, and yet be actually a more automaton, without consciousness or memory of his actual conditions (Ocklay and Ksir, 2004; Ocklay et al. (2004). The excessive intake of this drug (alcohol) at the traditional funeral rites environment is found to be one of the influencing factor of the behaviour of some mourners and the undertakers (Bogu-unibo) to behave unawares of their actions and the health-risk. An under-taker stated:

- “When I take ‘Akpeteshi’ (local dry gin) I don’t feel any sense of danger any more as I handle the corpse. Because, I am well fortified, no disease can affect me when I handle a dead body. I have entered a tomb and am immune to any disease that may be in the dead body I touch” (Key informant interview, Jirapa-Tampoe 2015).

It is very common observing corpses being carried shoulder high by one young man (Bogu-unibo) to the grave site without protective gear. These undertakers are made to believe that going through the ritual of entering the tomb and also using the ashes to rub all over their bodies before carrying a decomposing corpse protects them from infection. The health-risk of handling and carrying these corpses is high. Bathing/washing of corpses are done in the courtyards and without protective clothes or the uses of disinfectants. These practices are health-risk to the deceased’s family members living in the house especially children who eat soil around and even picking food on the ground and eating it.

8.2. Possibility of Contamination of the National Currency

Traditionally, all incoming visitors are required to throw some notes or coins at the corpse sitting or lying in-stage. The ‘Bogu-unibo’ will ensure that all monies that are placed on or thrown at the corpse are carefully picked out and shared among themselves during the burial. The health-risk here is that such monies (notes and coins) are circulated within the region and the nation as a whole. There is a high possibility of these coins and notes that were in touch with the corpse being contaminated with any of the infectious diseases that caused the death of the person. The public holding and keeping these currency notes and coins are at a health-risk of infection. Traditional funeral rites usually draws large crowds of people to the funeral grounds as shown in Figures 7 resulting in environmental pollution at the staging grounds. Because most funeral grounds do not have private/public toilets and urinals at the staging grounds. The excessive intake of drugs (alcohol) at the funeral grounds could be inducing immoral relations during the wake-keeping. These acts could worsen the spread of STD’s in the region. Also, the incidence of infectious and parasitic diseases may increase as people keep-wake in the open thus increasing the mosquito bites on them.

9. Conclusion

The health-risk associated with the Dagaaba traditional funeral rites is found to be externally high. The risk theory clearly demonstrates how the behaviour of mourners and undertakers are exposed to risk of infection with parasitic and infectious diseases. Because, the corpse is touched by several people without using protective clothes. It is also found that mourners engage in excessive intake of alcoholic beverages. The excessive intake of drugs (alcohol) at the funeral grounds could be inducing immoral relations during the wake-keeping. These acts could worsen the spread of STDs in the study area. Also, people eat in groups and use common drinking cups and calabashes. The incidence of infectious and parasitic diseases (malaria, Typhoid fever among others) may increase as people keep-wake in the open, thus increasing the mosquito bites on them. The wake-keeping where the mourners sleep outside by the corpse increases the incidence of malaria and other disease due to the excessive mosquito bites. The funeral rites usually draw large crowds of people to the grounds resulting in environmental pollution because there are no private/public toilets and urinals at the staging grounds. There is also a common scene of fresh graves in front of homes, in the courtyards or backyards in the study area.

9.1. Some Recommendations

As a matter of public health promotion, the Regional Administrative Authority in conjunction with the Ministry of Health and the District Assemblies should:

- Acquire burial sites in the towns and villages, and make it mandatory for all corpses to be buried in these public cemeteries the study area;
- Engage in a vigorous public health education on the local radio stations in the region, using the local (Dagaare)language, on the dangers of contracting infectious/parasitic diseases at traditional funeral rites performance;

- The culture of throwing money or placing it on dead bodies during funeral rites should be critically examine with all the stake holders in the region and possibly modernised.

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