

## Expiation and Punishment: A Viewpoint on Tongu Mafi Mortuary Rites in Ghana

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### Abstract

Aspects of the mortuary practices of the Tongu Mafi people of Ghana may be viewed as having seemingly contradictory philosophical explanations. However, the expiatory and punitive reasons are very clear and purposeful in the metaphysics of the people. An investigation into Tongu Mafi mortuary practices reveals different rituals and matching ceremonies with varied explanations on the occasion of death, burial and funerals. This paper focuses on those mortuary rites from two perspectives: the rituals as expiation and the rites as punishment. Whatever the label for the ritual, the society often views victims of the practice negatively. They include people considered to be evildoers, persons with disabilities, those who die unnatural deaths, and adults who failed to procreate. Often, these mortuary rites are explained as expiatory, especially to settle the souls of the victims in the hereafter. However, in Tongu Mafi philosophical thought, these are also punitive mortuary rites. This paper argues that such victims' corpses are punished in order to encourage morally responsible life among the living and to ensure the realisation of specific soteriological ambitions. Furthermore, these beliefs and practices facilitate a harmonious relationship between the worlds of the living and the dead.

**Keywords:** expiation, punishment, traditional beliefs, ancestors, hereafter, evil, morality

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## Résumé

Certains aspects des pratiques mortuaires du peuple Tongu Mafi du Ghana peuvent être considérés comme ayant des explications philosophiques apparemment contradictoires. Cependant, les motifs expiatoires et punitifs sont très clairs et déterminés dans la métaphysique du peuple. Une enquête sur les pratiques mortuaires Tongu Mafi révèle différents rituels et cérémonies d'appariement avec des explications variées à l'occasion de décès, d'inhumation et de funérailles. Cet article se concentre sur ces rites mortuaires sous deux angles : les rituels comme expiation et les rites comme punition. Quelle que soit l'étiquette du rituel, la société considère souvent les victimes de la pratique de manière négative. Ils comprennent des personnes considérées comme des malfaiteurs, des personnes handicapées, des personnes qui meurent de mort non naturelle et des adultes qui n'ont pas réussi à procréer. Souvent, ces rites mortuaires sont expliqués comme expiatoires, notamment pour apaiser les âmes des victimes dans l'au-delà. Cependant, dans la pensée philosophique Tongu Mafi, ce sont aussi des rites mortuaires punitifs. Cet article soutient que les cadavres de ces victimes sont punis afin d'encourager une vie moralement responsable parmi les vivants et d'assurer la réalisation d'ambitions sotériologiques spécifiques. De plus, ces croyances et pratiques facilitent une relation harmonieuse entre les mondes des vivants et des morts.

**Mots clés:** expiation, punition, croyances traditionnelles, ancêtres, l'au-delà, mal, moralité

## Introduction

In almost all African indigenous societies, utmost care is taken on occasions of death, preparation for burial and ceremonies for funerals. The various rituals and ceremonies involved are to facilitate smooth transition of the dead from the land of the living to the appropriate designated section of the hereafter. The experience of the Tongu Mafi people of Ghana reflects this general worldview in African indigenous societies. The Tongu Mafi people are a section of the Ewe-groupings located at the south-eastern part of Ghana. Generally, the beliefs, worldviews, and cultural practices of the Tongu Mafi people are like the Ewe ethnic people and other cultural societies in Ghana. However, cosmological beliefs and worldviews of the hereafter, particularly, mortuary rites and other funeral practices, differ in their details from the other Ewe-groupings and other cultural societies in Ghana.

An investigation into the mortuary practices of the Tongu Mafi people reveals two main forms of disposing of dead bodies: earth burial and cremation. There are different types or forms of earth burial with matching rituals and ceremonies. Different cosmological and philosophical worldviews define the means for the disposal of the dead body out of the world of the living and facilitate its smooth transition into the spirit world. First, the earth burial is considered the most dignified means of disposing the and facilitating the soul's transition from the mundane into the spirit world. The degree of dignity associated with a particular burial and other mortuary rites depends on the moral life of the person in his/her lifetime, the kind of death and certain human conditions in which the individual finds himself or herself. Persons who have lived a moral and worthy life are given the most dignified and celebrated burial at cemeteries; a place considered as the symbolic resting place for the ancestors. People who are given earth burial at marked sections of a cemetery and outside cemeteries include persons with certain disabilities, persons who have died unnatural deaths, children, and the average adult who never procreated or had children. It is a moral responsibility, in fact, a duty without choice, for an average adult of the Tongu Mafi to at least have a biological child.

In the past when human settlements were relatively smaller in population and land size, the burial places were distinct in their locations. Therefore, burial and disposal places for those who do not qualify to be buried in the ordinary cemetery were clearly demarcated. With the expansion in human population and settlements, and the reduction in availability of land for general use, especially, in the urban communities, burial and places for the disposal of the dead were created as unified cemeteries. However, they are sectioned according to the

category of the dead designated for each section. For instance, there are separate sections for adults, children, and victims of unnatural deaths. Even in this present time, remote communities with available land still have separated burial places.

Again, cremation in Tongu Mafi, on the other hand, unlike other cultures and religions where it is a normal means of disposing the dead, is a punitive mortuary rite. It is the severest imaginable punishment reserved for persons considered evil. The question then is, “what informs the type of burial and appropriate mortuary rites of the Tongu Mafi Ewes?” There may be strands of reasons, but among the overarching objectives of this paper is to demonstrate how notions of post-mortem rites conflate expiation and punishment, and facilitate smooth transition into the hereafter, as well as the moral implication for the living.

Against this background, the paper examines mortuary rites of the Tongu Mafi people of Ghana from two perspectives: the rituals as an expiation and, again, as a punishment. This is analysed by identifying the various means of disposing dead bodies and investigate the reasons for the accompanying mortuary rites among the Mafi people in the Volta Region of Ghana. The analysis will also demonstrate how the beliefs, worldviews and practices of both expiatory and punitive mortuary rites impact moral praxis. The main object of the paper, in the end, is to demonstrate that the fundamental philosophical reasons for post-mortem rituals among the Tongu Mafi people of Ghana, either as expiation or for punishment, differs from other known religious and cultural practices around the world.

To reach the aim, research was conducted across the settlements of the Mafi people in the Tongu Districts in the Volta Region of Ghana between 2010 and 2018. The information was derived from interviews, observation, and review of related literature on the Tongu Mafi people. The framework for this study is the notion of the ancestral home and the Tongu Mafi people’s conceptualisation of evil and its remedies in society. Both the notion of the ancestral home and the conceptualisation of evil in Mafi thought are couched in their philosophical understanding of death. Apart from the introduction and conclusion, the paper has three main sections. The first discusses the philosophical understanding of death in the metaphysics of the Tongu Mafi Ewes. This is followed by types of burial and their associated rituals. The next section is on cremation, which serves as both an expiatory and punitive mortuary rite for the Tongu Mafi Ewes. The paper thus concludes that notions of expiation and punishment are inextricably bound in the application of post-mortem rites.

## Notion and Philosophical Understanding of Death

The notion of death is normally explained in the context of dual dimensions of existence of Mafi cosmological belief. There is life for those living in the mundane world and life for those in the spirit world. The notion of death (*ku*) in Mafi is explained as a change from one state of existence to another. The *luyor* or soul, even as a spiritual entity, can manifest in the exact physical form of the person in his or her lifetime. The *luyor*, however, does not manifest in *kodzogbe* or the mundane during the life of the person. Similarly, the *luyor* cannot be at *Tsiefe* or the spirit world when the person is not dead. In other words, the *luyor* cannot function actively at both the land of the living and that of the dead at the same time. For vivid imagery, death is regarded as a form of “sleep”. Death then, in Mafi thought, does not bring existence to an end, but a form of transition to another form of existence. The transition to another existence gives meaning to the image held of *Tsiefe* by Mafi people. Similarly, human activities are performed in the world of spirits just as performed in the mundane world. Meyer (1999: 65) describes this notion that “*Tsiefe* was a mirror image of the world, it consisted of the same towns, clans and families which the dead soul joined.” It is this belief and image of the world of the spirits that orient the relationships between the living and the dead.

The dead also participate in the activities of the living. They reveal themselves in different ways to the living, especially, to the families they belonged to when they were on earth. While spirits which were not accepted by the ancestors visited their families to draw attention to omissions, especially, of rituals to expiate their souls, good spirits reveal information required to ensure harmony and prosperity in the family, lineage, or clan which they were members.

Apart from the medium of divination, an ancestor or the spirit of a morally good person can appear in dreams to family members. The spirit can, for instance, show where a missing valuable property can be found, show the cure or remedies for sicknesses, or console a neglected member of the family. They may even warn the family about certain omissions that should be corrected. At the same time, some deceased persons can appear physically to family members or relatives, especially those who are not aware of their demise. They can deliver items including money for loved ones. In the 1960s, Fiawoo (1967: 265) described this cosmological notion of death as experience of the Ewe people in Ghana:

*Tsiefe*, a place from which one does not return, is not an exact spot that one can locate in space. It is loosely identified with man's original home or the portion of the earth inaccessible to the average Ewe. Five or more decades ago, when Nigeria seemed physically remote from Eweland, adventurous traders to Nigeria had interesting tales of their encounters with dead kinsmen in the Yoruba market of that country. The dead disappeared into a thin air when their identity became known. To the average illiterate Ewe, Nigeria remains *Nolime* [ghost land, the place of departed souls].

This phenomenon is still common in Mafi. One of my discussants cited her personal experience of this occurrence. According to her narrative, money was delivered to her by her son who had died about a decade ago. She indicated that her son came as near as to the next village, gave the money to a woman to be given to her. She added that, he mentioned her name and claimed he came from Tamale, a town far away in the northern part of Ghana. The attire of the son as described by the messenger was one of his favourites. There are other many narratives of people encountering persons who had died, but when their identities were disclosed, they disappeared.

The notion of death also explains Mafi people's philosophy on reincarnation. As people died and go to *Tsiefe*, the souls are later reborn into *Kodzogbe*. This cyclical pattern of life existence hinges on the belief in reincarnation. They are not new souls that are born but souls that have once lived, except that some of the reincarnated persons cannot be known by their family members. Discussants expressed their beliefs into two forms of reincarnation. Some of the discussants were of the view that the reincarnated person is a different soul from the ancestor believed to have been reincarnated. A new-born is a different person but adopts the characteristics of the ancestor. It is explained that the child only adopts the behaviour and follows the advice of the ancestor who led him or her into the material world. Others were also of the view that an ancestor can be reborn to different parents. It is often pointed out that the reborn ancestor may look exactly as a known ancestor with physical marks and other traits. The belief is that persons who died untimely and could not fulfil their destinies are reborn and given chances to accomplish them. In expressing the belief at burial, people suspected to have had untimely deaths are warned to revenge their deaths and stay longer in life when they are reincarnated. This is how life is kept in perpetual cyclical motion and between *Tsiefe* and *Kodzogbe* or the spirit and the mundane worlds respectively.

Again, in Mafi thought, the notion of ancestorship is couched in the philosophical understanding of death. The notion of ancestorship is quite pervasive in African societies. While there are general similarities in the concept and functions of the ancestors, there are differences in the details of the social, cultural, and religious explanations of the relationship between the ancestors and their descent groups. One common notion about the ancestors is the fact that they are historical figures who once lived among their descendants but are now dead. Also, the recognition and worship of the ancestor is limited to “the community among which they lived and worked and with which they are identified” (Sarpong, 1971: 2). This is partly the basis of the communal differences in the functions of the ancestors. But as observed by Fiawoo (1967: 267), “death and incorporation into the spirit world do not automatically entitle a deceased person to the status of ancestor.” There are specific conditions by communal standards that can make a person qualify for the honour of being an ancestor. The basic conditions, at least in the Ghanaian experience, have been summarised by Sarpong (1971: 3), “One must have been an adult. ... he must have died a “natural” death. Death through “unclean” diseases such as leprosy and epilepsy would be taken as indicating some hidden crime committed by the deceased on account of which he cannot be remembered as an ancestor. ... One must have led a clean, unimpeachable life.”<sup>1</sup>

Like Sarpong’s (1971: 3), observation, in Mafi thought, a person must live up to an old age, have children and die a “natural” death. Persons who suffer accidental deaths *ametsivume*, afflicted with diseases considered evil and abominable *busudor* such as leprosy, epilepsy and insanity, and those who commit suicide *amedokuiwulawo*, are not qualified to be *togbeawo* or ancestors. But more important to these disqualifications is a murder. Whereas persons who suffer accidental deaths and persons afflicted with *busudor* or abominable diseases are given burial but in a separate cemetery or a sectioned part of the cemetery, murders must necessarily be cremated. In cases where, deceased persons are buried as result of wrong information, and evidence points out that they had murdered someone, their bodies will be exhumed, and then cremated, irrespective of the period after burial or the condition of the corpse in the grave.

Both the notion of ancestorship and mortuary practices are influenced by the conceptualisation of evil from the perspective of the Tongu Mafi people. The people of Mafi acknowledge the reality of evil. The details of the concept of evil in Mafi thought may vary, but include what in Western formulation classified as natural or physical and moral evil. Shattuck (2001: 50) explains that “Natural evil occurs in the form of elemental disasters and scourges, which may affect

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1 See also, Dzobo, 1985: 334–340.

any of us and over which we have limited control.” On the other hand, “*Moral evil* refers to actions undertaken to harm or exploit others in contravention of accepted moral principles or statutes within a society. These actions are subject to judgement and punishment, mitigation and aggravation, repentance, and remission.” By these definitions, the bulk of what constitute evil in society can be labelled moral evil and attributed to human agency.

Whatever the labels or categories, such distinctions are hardly articulated in Mafi cosmological worldview. Evil certainly is not presented as a unified concept in their cosmology, but whatever the concept, it has the same fears, images and approaches of remedy. Also, all forms of evil are threat to the well-being and survival of the people and the totality of the society. In my discussions with informants, it was observed that evil is defined or explained in the context and philosophical understanding of life. A discussant noted that “in Mafi, if someone is said to have done evil, it means that the person has done something that can kill a person or destroy a person’s life.” It is with this understanding of life that Meyer (1999: 86) described that “like many other African peoples, the Ewe considered life as the highest value.”

Therefore, in exploring and defining evil, life becomes a focal issue. From the findings, it would be very difficult to conceptualise evil without relating the entities involved to the traditional worldview of life. What stands out in Mafi people’s philosophy and understanding on the notion of death is that notions of ancestorship, beliefs about the hereafter and the required mortuary rites for the disposal of the dead are all regulated and influenced by the people’s conceptualisation of evil.

The conceptualisation of evil in Tongu Mafi people’s metaphysics and philosophy defines the type of burial or means of disposing the dead, and at the same time regulates the choice of post-mortem rites. In Tongu Mafi thought, evil is defined as whatever that can cause the destruction or maim the quality of human life; and this can be the individual or other’s life. The cause can also be either physical or spiritual. The spiritual causes are more dreaded than the physical, as such witchery and sorcery are the most abhorred practices in Mafi thought. Apart from witches, sorcerers and their clients, other victims for cremation include murderers and persons who have caused induced abortion. Both earth burial and cremation have defined processes (Ahortor, 2015: 100–105; Agbanu, 1999).



The processes of directing the soul of a deceased person to the appropriate designated section of the hereafter and sustaining a harmonious relationship between the physical and spirit worlds hinge on the appropriateness of the expiatory and punitive post-mortem rites. A cultural analysis of the mortuary practices of the Tongu Mafi people shows that, apart from the burial and rituals for persons who have lived a morally good and worthy life, almost all the other forms of disposing the dead, either by earth burial or cremation, have both expiatory and punitive elements. In other cultures, and religions, one of the goals of expiation, as profoundly expressed in Christian teachings, is “reconciliation, reuniting those who have been alienated” (Hanson, 1997: 155). The person, life and works of Jesus Christ is therefore considered an expiation, reconciling humans with God through Christ. However, in the experience and religious philosophy of the Tongu Mafi people, post-mortem rites described as expiation is not aimed at reconciling the “sinners” with the ancestors or *Mawu*, God. The expiated souls do not become ancestors. The souls of those ascertained to be evildoers go through expiation ritual only to calm and settle them in their preserved section in the hereafter, and this is located outside the ancestral home. The morally good and those who lived a worthy life are those who qualify for ancestorship, or at least join the ancestors at the ancestral home in the hereafter. The context, basis and purpose of post-mortem rituals that constitute expiation among the Tongu Mafi Ewes is explained by Ametewee and Christensen (1977: 360),

There is a general belief among the Ewe of Ghana and Togo that when a person dies the soul of the deceased goes to live in a nether world which is beyond a river, a common belief along the Guinea Coast of West Africa. This spirit-world, known as *Tsiefe* to the Ewe, is believed to be divided into two units, one for those who have led exemplary lives and the other for ‘criminals’ such as witches, sorcerers and murderers. Some Ewes believe that even the ‘bad part’ of the underworld would not accept the spirit of the criminal unless a special type of ritual has been performed following death. In this case the spirit of the deceased criminal lingers on in this world, plaguing and punishing members of his family or lineage until the appropriate ceremony is performed.

The mortuary rites and place of burial of those considered ‘criminals’ are distinct from all other ways of disposing dead bodies. In this case, a denial of burial at the ordinary cemetery in the mundane, and consequent denial into

the ancestral home in the hereafter, require an expiation or a reparation for the offence of not making it to the ancestral home. In addition to the expiation are the punitive mortuary rites depending on the kind of life lived, death and burial or the means of disposing the dead body. Both the expiatory and punitive mortuary rites are essentially meant to calm and contain the souls of the victims at their allotted section of the hereafter outside the ancestral home. The average adult who fails or could not procreate finds space in the ancestral home even though he or she does not qualify to be an ancestor.

### **Types of Death and Burial Rites**

The occasion of death is very important to the Mafi people. The ceremonies and rituals relating to death are given detailed attention. Any unnecessary commissions and omissions could have grave repercussion. The concern for detailed attention also stems from the fact that any mistakes or carelessness on the part of family members or ritual celebrants may incur displeasure, not only from other members of the community, but also even more displeasure from the spirit realm. In Mafi thought, the type of death that has occurred, the age and social status of the person, and more importantly, the moral life of the deceased are factors taken into consideration to determine the type of burial and funeral to be performed. In recent time however, some special attention is given to the burial and funeral for wealthy people, not based on traditional notions of morality, but a shift from traditional values to some contemporary practices. Traditionally, the type of burial and funeral are done according to the cosmological beliefs of the people, and the core of these beliefs is to ensure smooth transition of the deceased into the appropriate section of the spirit world and to the satisfaction of the soul of the deceased. For this reason, the cultural role of the diviner in finding out the cause of death, the appropriate means of disposing the corpse, and the post-mortem rites required, become very important.

#### *Death of Children*

While the death of an adult may have elaborate ceremonies and rituals, the death of a child is not celebrated. It may rather be looked down with scorn. The belief is, naturally a person should live up to an old age, and the traditional symbolism is sunrise to sunset. It is therefore believed that if a person dies in infancy or childhood, there must be something amiss. Usually, two fundamental concerns are raised: is the death of the child caused by an enemy or should the death be accepted as destiny? At times, people would like to know if the death of the child is a misdirected punishment for offences that others have committed. The burial

rite of the child is informed by the conclusions drawn by the elders, in consultation with diviners, regarding the concerns.

As stated earlier, there are no elaborate ceremonies and funerals on the death of a child. Children below the age of five are not buried in the normal cemetery. Even those above five and in the mid-teens are buried in a section close to adults but separated from them. In the past, infants were buried at a shady place around the house or near the cemetery. When it is ascertained that the death of a child was caused by an enemy, at burial, the dead is admonished to revenge his or her death. The ancestors are also asked not to forgive the perpetrators. If the death is known to be a punishment for the misdeeds of others, attempts are made to console the dead for the unfortunate incident, and later, the elders try to find solution to the offence.

There are different dimensions to deaths of children, which are attributed to destiny. There are children who are believed to have bargained for bad destiny. Infant mortality, for instance, is considered a bad destiny. A child who is known to have such a destiny is warned at burial not to return with such bad or evil destiny. In some cases, it can be detected that it is the same *dzikudziku* soul or child who has been reincarnating several times through the same mother. At times, the parents may not take notice of certain peculiar characteristics or behaviour to alert them that the very child had been tormenting them with childhood deaths. These children may be born on the same weekday and may die on a particular weekday. They may also die at almost the same age and in similar circumstances. The best the family can do is to break the cycle of reincarnation, in order to stop the frustration and predicament of the family, particularly that of the mother. As part of the mortuary rites to break the cycle of reincarnation of stubborn *dzikudziku* soul, the corpse is mutilated as punishment. However, there is a popular belief that some of the *dzikudziku* souls, which are often described as very stubborn, are reborn with the scarification of the mutilation that was inflicted on their bodies at previous burial, which was to deter their reincarnation. The belief in the phenomenon of reincarnation is widespread in West Africa. Among the Yoruba and Igbo of Nigeria, the *dzikudziku* phenomenon is referred to as *abiku* and *ogbanje* respectively (Opoku, 1978: 93). Among the Mafi people, if, however, it is revealed that a child is involved in witchery and sorcery, the body is cremated. In fact, it is believed that some children acquire evil powers even before their birth, while others acquire it after birth, just as an adult. It is not uncommon to hear of children being cremated in Mafi societies. In the religio-cultural worldview of the Tongu Mafi people, mortuary rites for children are both expiatory and punitive. The rites as an expiation enable them to settle

calmly in the hereafter and as a punishment to warn and deter them from reincarnating with a destiny of childhood mortality.

### *Death and Burial Rites of the Morally Good Adult*

There are specific rules and traditions on the announcement of death, burial, and funeral rites of adults. The rules, traditions and processes are all aimed at eliminating evil in the society. There is no immediate announcement of death of an adult. It is withheld until the elders of the family or lineage have consulted with diviners to ascertain the cause of death and directions for the burial of the corpse. After the consultation, the death announcement can be made and concerned relatives can express their grief by weeping. The most important stages in the ceremonies are the laying in state and burial at the cemetery. Laying the corpse in state has no peculiar ceremonies but the family members are very watchful, giving particular attention to those paying their last respects, so that no bad person drops anything on the corpse. It is believed that a piece of a particular herb finding its way onto the dead body or into the coffin can change true information from the deceased to diviners. In other words, a righteous person, for instance, can claim to be evil because of the powers inherent in the herb that has had contact with the corpse. Thus, the time the corpse is laid in state could be an opportunity for evil persons to be mischievous.

At the cemetery, libation is poured before the coffin is lowered into the grave. In Mafi, graves are dug horizontally, from east to west. The head side of the corpse goes to the west while the legs points to the east. The journey to Tsiefe is symbolically westward, reflecting a full cycle of life as symbolised in sunrise to sunset. Male adults are laid on their left side in the coffin while female adults are laid on their right side, to match sleeping positions of married couples when their heads are directed towards the west. If the death is natural or his destiny, then the soul should rest in peace. On the other hand, if the death was caused by an evil person, the soul should come back to revenge for his/her death. While some graves are immediately covered, others are just covered with a piece of cloth for other rituals to be performed later, especially in the night. In the past, most elderly persons were buried in their homes – in their rooms to be precise. This practice had been banned by government<sup>2</sup> but attempts are still made to smuggle dead bodies from the cemeteries to secretly bury them in the house. This partly accounts for the incomplete burial or covering of graves on the day of burial. It is also explained that some elders are members of cults, therefor their mortuary rituals cannot be performed publicly. Often, incomplete burial signals a possibility of exhumation for cremation.

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2 See The Mortuaries and Funeral Facilities Act 1998 (Act 563); ss. 26–29 (of Ghana).

### *Burial of Persons with Disabilities*

Persons with certain disabilities have different mortuary rites. These disabilities include insanity, epilepsy, leprosy, and persons afflicted with yaws, hunchback, and goitre. These diseases and disabilities are traditionally considered *busudor* (abominable and evil diseases) and as such persons afflicted with these diseases or disabilities should have special mortuary rites (Ahortor, 2015: 83; Ahortor, 2000). This is grounded in cosmological beliefs as noted by Ahortor (2016: 109–110):

In spite of the pain and agony persons with disabilities and those afflicted with abominable ill-health or *busudor* encounter in life, there is that strong conception that their predicaments are sometimes a deserving divine punishment. As a divine retribution, persons with disabilities develop or are congenially afflicted with disabilities and abominable ill-health for evil deeds committed by themselves or others in their society, especially, their relatives. In African indigenous societies where the concept of destiny is a fundamental cosmological belief, attempts are often made to explain some occurrences of disabilities and ill-health as divine approved destiny.

The corpses of persons with these afflictions are not laid in state, and neither mourning nor drumming is performed at their burials. Folktales are told in places of mourning. The storyteller must hold in one hand a woven palm branch to represent a broom while narrating the stories. This signifies the transfer of the misfortunes of that disability and the person onto the broom to be cast away with the burial of the disabled person. The disabled are not buried in the normal cemetery and are never buried during daytime but at night. The procession to the burial ground led by a person holding woven palm branch, which is lit as a torch, and another also holding a palm branch at the rear. The people going for the burial do not look back and return quietly without looking back after the burial. The corpse is not put in a coffin but wrapped in a piece of cloth, and the personal belongings such as clothes, bedding, cooking utensils or generally what the disabled used in his or her lifetime are all packed and dumped in the grave along with the corpse. There are no funeral rites to be performed for the disabled persons.

In 1990, an observer witnessed a burial of a disabled person at Mafi Tove Wukpo in the Volta Region of Ghana. The deceased suffered from epilepsy and died from tetanus infection because of neglected wounds at the Adidome Hospital while on admission. The hospital is about six kilometres from the village. The corpse was brought to the village from the hospital in the late afternoon, but since it was prohibited by tradition to bring the corpse of a disabled person and persons

who died elsewhere from accidents into the village, the vehicle carrying the corpse went round the village and stopped at a spot where handicapped persons were buried. The place was bushy and the team of young men and a couple of elders who gathered there could not even locate the grave of the last handicapped person buried there. The grave dug for the corpse was ordinary, it was neither longer nor wider than those dug in the normal cemetery. The corpse was buried later in the night without the coffin she was brought in from the hospital. The coffin was then broken into pieces. Her clothes and other possessions were dumped into the grave.<sup>3</sup>

The interment of the disabled with their belongings is a symbol of severing ties with the misfortunes of both the disability and the deceased, and to admonish the deceased not to reincarnate with such evil or bad omen after such humiliating burial. The entire belongings of the disabled that were interred with the corpse attests to the abject deprivation in which persons with disabilities find themselves in their lifetime. The imagery of the ancestral home as a place of no disability partly explains why persons with certain disabilities are given special burials and in separate cemeteries. In Mafi thought, the mortuary rites and burial of persons with disabilities have both expiatory and punitive connotations.

#### *Burial Rites for Victims of Unnatural Deaths*

As earlier stated, persons pass on via accidental or other unnatural deaths are given special burial. In Mafi thought, unnatural deaths include victims of motor accidents, arson, suicide, hanging, gunshot, drowning, dying in the process of miscarriage, maternal mortality, lightning, fallen trees and collapsed building, snakebites, and attack by wild animals, among others. The mortal remains of such deceased persons are not brought to the family house, rather, a small shed, usually made of palm-fronds and branches, is erected at the outskirts of the family house. In the past, the shed was erected at the outskirts of a village or settlement, especially when the area was considerably small. Also, when the accident occurs outside the settlement, the mortal remains are not brought into the village but kept at the outskirts of the village or a spot closer to the place of burial. In recent times, however, the corpses are brought to the family home, and innovative means of adorning the entrance to the place where the dead is laid in state are adopted. This is a creative way to signify the meeting of traditional requirement of resting or keeping the corpse under a palm frond shed. The corpse is laid there in order

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3 Observation of the burial of Anti, a disabled woman at Mafi Tove Wukpo on 4th July 1990 and cited in Ahortor, 2000: 77; also, Ahortor, 2015: 82–85.

to have all necessary ceremonies or rituals till the time for burial. Usually, there is no wake-keeping because their bodies are not supposed to be kept long. In cases of accidental death, the body of the deceased is wrapped in *avoryi* – a piece of white cloth or calico before it is put into the coffin. They are normally buried soon after the accident.

If the victim of an unnatural death happens to be a pregnant woman or a person in the process of delivering, the baby or foetus in the womb would be removed by some traditional specialists. This is normally accompanied by the performance of some rituals. The deceased mother is wrapped in a piece of calico before she is placed in the coffin for burial, which is separately done from the that of the deceased child or foetus, to underline their dignity as human being. In fact, in Mafi traditional practice, two or more persons are never buried in the same grave. On the same premises, abortion is tantamount to murder or taking a life. Usually, the dead child is not put in a coffin but wrapped in a piece of white cloth for burial. It should be stated that it is not only foetuses that are removed from dead bodies for separate burial. Certain physical deformities including hernia, goitre and hunchback are also removed from dead bodies and buried separately. In the cemetery, the victims of unnatural deaths are not buried among the graves of those who died naturally. After burial, the procession, especially those who carried the coffin to the graveyard, walk back home in a serpentine order. In other words, they do not walk straight or in a file back to the house from the cemetery. This is done with the belief to confuse the ghost of the deceased person, should it attempt to follow them home to cause any havoc to the living. The temporal shed is destroyed immediately after burial.

One may wonder why persons who die accidentally are treated differently. In Mafi philosophical thought, and generally of traditional societies in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa, people experience accidental death for various reasons. However, they all revolve around the belief that accidental deaths are caused by evil persons against the victims or at times “indicating some hidden crime committed by the deceased on account of which he [or she] cannot be remembered as an ancestor” (Sarpong, 1971: 3). In Mafi thought, the expiation rite for victims of accidental death becomes imperative for the circumvention of possible threat to life, which satisfy demands from disembodied spirits who have forfeited *dagbe*, or the salvation guaranteed in the ancestral home. The persons whose duty is to ensure that the ceremony is performed to the standards of tradition could be held responsible for any omissions that would result in a loss of life. Mortuary rites and burial of victims of accidental deaths are considered expiatory, but never a punitive action. They are also buried in a marked section of the normal cemetery. However, if it is detected and ascertained that a victim of the accidental death is an evil person, such a person would be cremated.

*Special Burials: Executioners, Priests and Chiefs*

In Mafi tradition, some categories of people are treated with utmost respect because of their positions and functions in the society. Their burial rites also differ considerably from that of ordinary persons. While traditional understanding of morality exerts significant conceptual influence on burial rites, some exemptions are made in the cases of people considered to be 'special' in the administration of law and order in the society. Generally, it is by virtue of their position or office and its associated function(s) in the society that command the honours to be bestowed on them.

Mafi state executioners (*hletoawo*) have special burial rites. They are often referred to as *blafowo*. These are a group of men responsible for executing death sentences of guilty persons in the court of the paramount chief. Whenever a death penalty was passed on hardened criminals, incorrigible thugs, notorious robbers, murderers, witches and sorcerers, the executioners were responsible for the implementation of the ruling of the court. They are normally warriors, and their functions are not limited to the courts of the paramount chief. They also led people to war, as well as any other defence of the citizens and the Mafi society in general. Again, they were said to be responsible for getting other human souls to accompany a dead chief into the world of spirits. The announcement of their deaths and burial are shrouded in secrecy, and it is even believed that they are even buried secretly before the announcements of their deaths. The public burial processes are believed to be faked. The purported corpse laying in state is covered or dressed in a manner that one can hardly identify the deceased. They are also laid in rooms which are dark for any scrutiny or identification by the public. In Mafi thought, though the functions of the executioners border on killing, their roles in sustaining peaceful and stable society which is free from threats to life seem paramount and override the moral questions about their functions.

Traditional priests of the divinities are regarded as chiefs with traditional stool names. The mortuary rites of the traditional priest have a lot in common with the chief as a political leader. Details of burial processes are scanty. Even though the death will be announced at a point in time, the burial of the chief and priest, just as that of the executioner, is believed to always precede the announcement. In fact, the exact spot where chiefs are buried is always a secret. Furthermore, the rituals involved, especially, the demand for other souls to accompany the chief into the spirit world make the burials secret, and the accounts of these burials are inconsistent and very difficult to reconcile. In spite of the special burial and honours bestowed on executioners, priests and chiefs, they are not totally free



from punitive mortuary ritual of cremation. They must periodically go through rituals to cleanse them of the guilt of bloodshed in order to free themselves of any post-mortem punishment. Also, if they go beyond the duties imposed on them by the stool or state and engage in other destruction of life such as witchery or sorcery, they would be guilty of destroying life and must be cremated. These occurrences are however rare in Mafi history. The mortuary rites and burial of a chief, priest, and executioner, just as that of the morally good adult, have neither expiatory nor punitive connotations.

### *Burial of Adults who Fail to Procreate*

The aged and married couples are respected in Mafi communities. For an adult, both men and women, it is a moral responsibility to procreate. The philosophy is that it is incumbent on all to sustain the lineage, and without procreation the survival of the society and life in general is at risk of extinction. In this case, an adult without a biological child does not qualify to be an ancestor. Mama Gbeda Gbeku, a discussant, explained that “only people who are dead are ancestors. Adults who have not given birth to any child are still considered children and are not counted among the ancestors.” In Mafi cultural practices, there is a punitive mortuary rite for such persons. Before the dead body of such a person is put into the coffin, a special libation is poured to curse the life and reincarnation of the person. A splinter of wood is then forced into the genital of the man, and in the case of a woman, a fruit of a particular tree called *nyakpekpe* is forced into her genital. In Mafi thought, procreation is a moral obligation cherished and the punitive mortuary rites for those who fall short of this expectation are meant to circumvent their reincarnation, if they will, with this curse. These persons are not considered evildoers but are punished for the omission of the moral responsibility of procreation. They are therefore buried in the normal cemetery and among the adults.

It is a fact that science and medical care have made significant impact on traditional outlook and broaden knowledge on reproductive health in the Mafi society. However, in traditional beliefs and worldviews, there is no recognition of scientific explanations of infertility or barrenness as the basis for putting aside punitive post-mortem rites for non-procreation by adults. Thus, known scientific causes of non-procreation have, so far, not changed traditional worldviews on the moral obligation for every adult to procreate. Most often, the known scientific causes are subjected or traced to spiritual causations. For one thing, it had never been the case for an individual to justify his or her inability to procreate, nor neither have the rituals any gender discrimination. As stated earlier, the corpse of the adult who fails to procreate is buried in the normal cemetery, but the accompanying rituals are purely punitive.

*Amememe: Mafi Conception of Cremation of Evildoers*

The notion of *amememe* or cremation is not peculiar to the Mafi Ewes only, but also other Tongu Ewes along the Lower Volta River. It is however believed that the Mafi Ewes are the originators of this mortuary rite (Ametewee & Christensen, 1977: 363). In Mafi thought, cremation is just not to dispose of dead bodies, but a punitive mortuary rite for the most grievous offences. The notion of cremation seems to be the hub around which the expression of cosmological beliefs about the purpose of life and moral ideals of the Mafi people revolved. The practice of *amememe* gives insight into beliefs in the duality of existence and what happens in spiritual realms, apart from where the ancestors are believed to be staying. How cremation started is not accounted for in Mafi oral traditions.

Persons who are cremated are believed to have been rejected by the ancestors. By their deeds, they are not even welcome to the abode of the ancestors. Such persons are not cremated in order to join the ancestors. Rather the cremation is to expiate the souls of these evildoers to enable them settle peacefully in their space in the spiritual realm, which is outside the ancestral home, and also cease harassing the living, particularly their relatives. This buttresses the belief of the people of Tongu Mafi that expiation in their cultural practice does not lead to reconciliation with the ancestors. The need to cremate a dead body is not an imposition by relatives or the living but these are voluntary requests made by the spirits of these dead persons, in order to be accepted by their category of evildoers in their allocated part of the world of the spirits. For them to be rejected by the ancestors and again by their own kind, the spirits of these evil persons come back to the human world to pressurize the family or whosoever is responsible of their death, to ensure that the right expiatory rituals are performed for their corpses. They do not only manifest to relatives or merely haunt them, rather they are held responsible for some mysterious deaths of their relatives.

Cremation is a voluntary demand by the deceased person. During consultation with diviners, family members inquire of demands by the deceased persons and the diviner communicates these back to the family members. Considering the stigma and humiliation cremation brings, especially to the family of the deceased, naturally, it will be unwise on the part of the family and lineage to impose the rituals on their own members. Also, one can commit evil secretly and get away with it, but no one can escape telling the truth after death. After the ancestors reject a soul and the probable kind of spirits to join also shuns its company, perhaps there can be no alternative than to demand

for expiation of the soul to at least find space in the spirit world. It is explained that the soul of evil persons and those who suffer accidental deaths are restless and therefore urgently demand redress by expiation rites, but what happens to them exactly are unknown. They are restless, and suffering, but no one seems to know the exact conditions in that part of the spirit world.

### *The Ritual and Processes of Cremation in Mafi*

The process of cremation of a dead person starts with the revelation from a diviner that the spirit of the deceased person has requested the ritual. The Mafi people would not rely on one diviner, especially when he or she is the first to be consulted. This revelation for demand for cremation must be confirmed by other diviners. The elders also take notice of details of the information, as well as verify the information given by the various diviners. If the details of the report of two diviners, especially the claim of offence by the deceased, are conflicting, another diviner must be consulted. There had been instances where five or more diviners had been consulted for the determination of the burial of one person. If the details of the first two consultations differ significantly, the elders may choose to send two or more delegates to different diviners simultaneously to save time. The reason for caution in deciding to cremate partly stems from the irreparable humiliation and stigma the family will endure for a mistaken identity in cremating a dead body. Also, the elders are aware of the mischief of spiritual forces, in frustrating diviners when getting the right information from the deceased person. In fact, experience might have taught them of the consequences of wrong commissions in cremating innocent persons.

There are people who “specialize” in the ritual of cremation in Mafi. They are referred to as the ritual specialist, *amemela*. Ametewee and Christensen (1977: 362), writing on this subject observed that “there are no special people who carry out this ceremony, nor are special powers or protective medicine required. However, participants should be viewed as courageous people willing to undertake an unpleasant and dangerous task”. They continued with specific reference to the Mafi people that “Among the Mafi, only members of the Ablafu clan can exhume and burn the body of an accused witch” (Ametewee & Christensen, 1977: 363). The findings from my discussants contradicted these claims. First, my discussants acknowledged that the exercise is a “dangerous task” but noted that the threat or danger is more of a spiritual problem than physical. Without any spiritual protection, the people could be attacked and killed by evil forces. They also noted that to say a person is courageous, *kaletor*, in traditional philosophy is not a mere display of bravery but someone who is spiritually fortified to encounter very dangerous situations. In the past, this courage was mostly exhibited in battlefield.

Secondly, persons who cremate corpses are not limited to any clan. But more importantly, findings from my discussions showed that there is no “Ablafo clan” in Mafi. In Mafi, *ablafo* or *blafo* refers to executioner, and the word is Akan origin, which is *obrafo*, referring to the executioner. The ritual specialist in Mafi is normally *dzotor*<sup>4</sup> who possesses the requisite expertise and spiritual powers to subdue malevolent spirits to cremate them. If the ritual specialist is unable to subdue the spirit, the cremation could not stop the harassment of relatives by the spirit of the dead person. It is even believed that evil forces can mislead a weak ritual specialist and his or her team of assistants to exhume a different body in the wrong grave even though they might have marked the grave during the daytime. The ritual specialists are trained in that ‘profession’. If need be, other powerful *dzotorwo* from outside Mafi are invited to help cremate a very dangerous evil person.

At the graveside, prayers in the form of libation for permission to intrude in the sacred space of spirits are made to the land and ancestors, and an appeal is made to the deceased to remain calm for the remains to be exhumed. The mode of conveyance to the cremation spot would depend on the state of the remains. If the spirit had not been bounded earlier, for instance at home, it would be done at the graveside before the exhumation. If the coffin or casket has not deteriorated, it would be taken wholly away but if otherwise, everything in the grave is packed into a sack and carried to the cremation spot. For one thing, exhumation of remains is not confined to bodies of persons to be cremated; persons who have been wrongly buried in settlements of different lineages can be exhumed and reburied in the rightful place.

At the spot for cremation, a pyre is prepared from most combustible materials available. These include dried wood, petrol, palm oil and tyres. It is said that in recent times, some of the cremators use corrosive acids in addition to the above listed fuels. The ritual specialist prays for a successful ritual, commands the spirit of the deceased to accept the cremation and never have anything to do with the living. After the libation, the remains of the dead and the ritual items, together with the bound spirit are laid on the pyre. Fire is then set to the pyre while the team of cremators stand at the windward direction to avoid inhaling smoke from the fire. The ritual specialist and his team of assistants have their own rules which must be obeyed, otherwise they could be exposed to danger. Different stories are told of happenings at the site of cremation. There are instances where very notorious sorcerers and witches put

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4 *Dzotor* is a person with special spiritual powers for specific functions and these can be positive or negative. The plural form is *dzotorwo*.

up stiff resistance to the rituals. It is the punitive elements of the mortuary rites that are resisted by these evildoers. It is said that some of these stubborn spirits could transform into other creatures like rat, bat or birds and evade the pyre. However, the ritual specialist could charm to keep them transfixed, arrest and toss them back into the burning pyre. There had been instances where the ritual of cremation had to be done all over again because the spirit of the cremated person still come back to harm the family. In this case, more powerful diviners and ritual specialists would be consulted to verify whether there had been any omissions for them, which needs to be corrected. When it is ascertained that the ritual is successful, the family will surely breathe sighs of relief. At the same time, the disturbing soul will find rest and peacefully settle among its kind. To conclude the ceremony, the ritual specialist is said to take over the property of the cremated person and sell it to the family. It is a token or symbolic event. The ritual specialist for instance will take away an old sandal or hat and the family pay an insignificant amount for the rest of the property. This brings an end to the ceremony. The practice of this ritual is hinged on the belief that cremation is a punitive mortuary rite and evildoers are brought to justice. It is an attempt to reduce evil in the society, by deterring the living from practising.

Despite the resilience of the belief in cremation as a religio-cultural practice of the Tongu Mafi people, there have been divergent views on the continuity of the practice. The debate often erupts on the occasion where it is rumoured that well-to-do or renowned persons who die in the Mafi community are evildoers. There is a section of the Mafi community who argue that the practice should be rejected in contemporary times. The primary argument of these rejectionists is that the practice is outmoded. This position is often supported by members of the community who are Christians, and of the view that judgement and punishment after death is a preserve of God or the Supreme Being. On the other hand, among opinion leaders and custodians of the Mafi traditions and values, cremation of evildoers cannot be stopped, and the belief cannot be modified. As gatekeepers of Mafi tradition and heritage, these custodians claim the belief and practice is intrinsic to the construction of the identity of the Mafi people. They however recognise and welcome innovations in the practical cremation processes. These include the exhumation and performance of the cremation rituals extremely late in the night, as well as the use of effective corrosive acids to facilitate easy disposal of the corpse, rather than resorting to traditionally known combustible elements like wood and inflammable oil. The expression of these divergent views is captured by Agbanu (1999: 146) and categorised into three positions that is:

... there are three main reactions currently to the ritual. The first group of mainly traditional elders does not see anything wrong with the practice, and as a result, advocates its continued practice. The second group of largely the youth, on the other hand, is of the opinion that the ritual has outlived its usefulness and should therefore, be totally condemned and abolished. Between the two extremes lies another group that expresses the view that with a few modifications, the *amememe* [cremation] ritual could be adopted as the only appropriate method of burial for all categories of people.

As it is in the present, belief in the ritual and philosophy buttressing it have stood the test of time, but the practical processes of the ritual have seen innovations. Continuity in the belief and the philosophy backing the practice, and the determination of the gatekeepers of the custom and tradition make it difficult, if not impossible, to abandon cremation as expiation and punishment, at least, in the foreseeable future. In fact, there are no known platform of negotiations on these divergent views. Investigations into the topic only show the sides to the debate reacting to rumours, popular opinions, and criticisms in the public domain. Thus, there is no consensus by way of discussion or negotiation. The continuation of the practice without any tensions or upheavals suggests, at least, recognition and acceptance of the status quo.

## Conclusion

The burial rites of persons with certain disabilities and victims of unnatural deaths are expiatory and punitive in Mafi thought. In the case of persons who are guilty of destroying life, the post-mortem rites are meant to expiate and punish their souls and confine them to the section of the spiritual realm believed to have been designated for evildoers. Also, it is meant to warn and deter the living from evil acts. For persons with certain disabilities, victims of unnatural death and adults who fail to procreate to sustain society, they are punished after death to deter them from reincarnating with such misfortunes and deaths. In analysing the use and significance of punishment in Mafi thought, it was revealed that it is an effective means of safeguarding the ethical values of the people. The cherished ethical values have prohibitions and taboos hedging them against infractions. The regulation of social conduct is thus regarded as a shared responsibility of the community.

The various forms of punishment, together, serve as a guide for character reformation, deterrence to others, and keeping people in track for the attainment of *dagbe*, abundant life or salvation, in the mundane existence as well as in the hereafter. Evil prevents the realisation of *dagbe* or salvation in both the mundane and hereafter (Gaba, 1978: 389–401; Gaba, 1982: 131–150; Bansah, 2013). While post-mortem punishment serves as a tool for ensuring morality in the society, it is not regarded as an end onto itself, but also as means of maintaining harmonious relationship between the living and the dead. Therefore, it has been argued that expiatory and punitive mortuary rites impact moral praxis. The mortuary rites ensure reciprocal moral benefits between the living and their ancestors. Also, justification for moral omission does not find expression in the cosmological belief of the people's funeral rites. While there could be modifications in the practical rituals in this era of modernity, globalisation and liberalisation, the beliefs buttressing mortuary rites on burial and cremation among the Tongu Mafi Ewes are resilient.

Expiatory and punitive mortuary rites are quite intertwined with the notion of evil. Whatever the mortuary rites that would be performed at the death of a person, regardless of the age and gender of the deceased or the perceived cause of death, it must necessarily be ascertained whether the dead person was evil or not. The expiatory and punitive mortuary rites for evildoers restrict their disembodied spirits from harming the living and disrupting abundant life in the mundane. Some Mafi citizens have expressed concerns and rejection of the cremation ritual but are unable to dislodge the belief in and practice of the cremation. Therefore, the status quo remains and will continue. So, the ritual has soteriological value, in addition to the sound moral conduct it engenders in

the living. The reality of evil thus conceptually affects the soteriological outlook, and notions of life after death at all times in Mafi thought. In the construction of identity of the Tongu Mafi people, their outlooks of the hereafter, notions of ancestorship, conceptualisation of evil, as well as expiatory and punitive mortuary rites cannot be ignored in their individual and communal praxis.



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