

# “What a shock!”: On mediated narratives of achievement in popular Ghanaian death-announcement posters

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## Introduction

‘What a Shock’ is one of the varied titles on some of the public death-announcement posters that one encounters within contemporary Ghana’s visual landscape. In interviews with family members, associated with deceased persons, in relation to the choice of this phrase for such posters (unlike Celebration of Life, Home Call, Honoring His Life<sup>2</sup>), I learned that the term expresses the deceased’s family utter disbelief of their relation’s unexpected passing. I appropriate this phrase in this paper’s title to signal my surprise about how part of this popular media genre ‘silently’ remediates and materializes unique Ghanaian cultural narratives about achievement situated within traditional views about marriage, having children and taking responsible care of them. Here, I take the totality of this Ghanaian popular cultural practice of visual death announcement as co-constituted material artifact that simultaneously makes visible and tangible certain aspects of Ghanaian cultural beliefs not explicitly referenced in the posters.

## ‘w’abo bra’

In this essay I explore a facet of the posters which narrate achievement situated within a traditional Akan cultural worldview and captured in the expression ‘*w’abo bra*’ [to have lived a meaningful life] and essentially means ‘to have fulfilled certain key cultural expectations.’ In doing so, the key question that drives this piece’s inquiry into the posters is: how does the process of constructing narratives of achievement become concretely mediated through the popular Ghanaian death-announcement posters?

In what follows, first I briefly outline the analytical framework that underpins my interest in the posters: a material approach to culture. Second, due to how I take that aspect of the death-announcement posters which showcases ‘achievement narrative’ as an imaginative constructed work “render[ing] visible” (Meyer 2015, 23) an intangible cultural ideal (as encapsulated in ‘having lived a meaningful life’), I take the posters as manifesting

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix I, II, and III

a “material dimension of the [Ghanaian cultural] imagination” (Meyer 2008, 83). In positioning the posters as material manifestation of a cultural imaginary, I subscribe to the view that “the imagination [is] not limited to processes within the mind but is fed by and materializes through concrete [popular] cultural forms to which people relate with their senses, and which people employ to make sense” (Meyer 2015, 163). This lens thus allows us to conceptualize the posters “not in opposition to ‘abstract’ [cultural] ideas, norms, and values but as their indispensable carriers” (4). I follow this discussion with an explication of the Akan concept of *w’abo bra* and then show how this achievement narrative ideal is indirectly visualized in the posters.

### Obituary posters as constitutive for social relations and concepts

In terms of the material approach to culture, this framework simultaneously investigates the inter-relationships between humans and artifacts or the “material constitution of social relations” (“Editorial,” 1996, 13). An underlying assumption of this perspective is the idea that “without material expression, social relations have little substantive reality, as there is nothing through which these relations can be mediated” (Sofaer 2007, 1). Flowing from this idea is the belief that it is simply naive “humanism which views persons outside the context and constraints of their material culture and thereby establishes a dichotomy between persons and objects” (“Editorial” 1996, 11). The material approach to interrogate the posters calls for a concrete exploration of the manner through which “cultural construction of everyday life happens” (Morgan 2008, 228). This perspective to investigate posters emphasizes a practice-oriented approach to (popular) media research due to the key role of the social milieu that factors into the constitution of images (Morgan 2005, 2008). In the next section, I discuss a facet of the posters that ‘speaks’ to the expression of achievement around marriage and having children.

On virtually all of the posters, one finds the ‘listing’ of one’s marital status or lack thereof. In those cases where I have enquired as to the absence of the name of a partner on the posters, I was informed that when a person is not officially married either through the traditional route and/or church wedding, the deceased lineage does not officially recognize such unions. This non-acknowledgement is visually marked on the posters through the absence of a partner’s name. Here, one becomes aware of a ‘broader’ traditional Ghanaian societal expectation where responsible adults are expected to marry. According to Gyekye (1998), this charge to marry is deemed as “an obligation every man and woman must fulfil” (76). This ‘traditional’ expectation to get married is tied to the idea that marriage is core to the perpetuation of the lineage as well as to “the development and enlargement of kinship ties” (76). Implicit here is the expectation that all marriages should end in procreation. So important are children in marriage that the Akan (and most Ghanaian social groups) believe that childlessness disbars one to the coveted position of becoming an ancestor within the lineage (Opoku 1978). Thus, as I learned through my

interviews on the posters, the name-list of children (and [great] grand-children as the case may be) aims at portraying to the wider public how the deceased is the society's exemplar of having lived to achieve that societal standard of marriage and procreation. Admittedly, one can argue that contemporary Ghanaian trends associated Pentecostal religion, urbanization and unemployment does not allow the full realization of these traditional ideas to hold true, especially in urban centers. In granting this argument, I also argue that in spite of these factors, these beliefs still persist as evidenced in the posters.

This achievement of the deceased to have married and procreate, as I was informed, conveys one of the cultural virtue of '*bo bra pa*' 'to live/lead a worthy life.' Embedded in this concept of 'having lived a worthy life,' is the notion of having been responsible enough to have taken care of one's children in such a way that they may become independent and responsible citizens. A successful execution of this responsibility is generally believed to manifest itself in one's children achieved status in life. Thus, in some of the posters, beside the name-list of the deceased person's children are their current social positions in life.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes, even the names of the locations where they reside are included, especially if those areas are considered prestigious. Such a public display of the deceased's children's social status on the posters thus confers further prestige on the deceased.

## Conclusion and outlook

In conclusion, in this essay, I have chosen an approach that considers imagination and cultural narratives as entangled (Andrews 2014), and that, as a material approach to culture, can be used to examine a facet of the popular Ghanaian death-announcement posters. I have shown how a side of the material/visual medium of the posters remedies narratives of achievement that are in consonance with aspects of Ghanaian (Akan) 'traditional' notions of accomplishment related to marriage, having children and ensuring that such children become responsible adults in society. In all, the analysis here, just like my previous works on other Ghanaian popular media genres like popular video movies and political cartoons (Oduro-Frimpong 2014, 2018) contribute to ongoing efforts of the newly established Centre for African Popular at Ashesi University. Specifically, the goal is to spotlight the intellectual significance of African popular media formats as equally competent arenas to 'think with' understand contemporary sociopolitical and cultural issues in Ghana and Africa.

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix IV

References

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Appendix I



Photo by author

Appendix II

**HOME CALL**

The Entire Asana Abensu of Agogo, Nana Wireko Ampomah (Olinzi-Abukomshere), Nana Oberg Nketia (Abansa Plain at Agogo), Nana Obeng Agyei Senwaman, Abena Pansa Kwaku Manku-Agbelem (Adana Abansa, Kumawo East), Elder Oboi Yobash (Achimota, Accra), Yaa Donkor at Agogo, Mr. Amponsah, Oboasin Akua Afra, Madam Kwarko, Madam Ama Olinwaa, Madam Yaa Brago, Kwaku Sam, Madam Yaa Kwame, Nana Akua Abrefi, Mr. Kofi Akomesh, Mr. Yaw Akreth, Juliana Agyeem (a.k.a Sister Julie), Kwambena Appiah wish to announce the sudden death of their beloved son,

**Frank Oduro-Frimpong**  
(a.k.a Old Soldier)  
whose death occurred on 30th October 2017 at Nii Bol Town, Accra.

**Funeral Arrangements are as follows:**  
LYING IN STATE: Saturday, 2nd December 2017 (4am-9am) at Akweteman, near Iran Clinic.  
BURIAL: Saturday, 2nd December 2017 (10am)  
FINAL FUNERAL RITES: Saturday, 2nd December 2017 at Family Residence Akweteman, near Iran Clinic.  
THANKSGIVING SERVICE: Sunday, 3rd December 2017 at Family Residence Akweteman, near Iran Clinic.  
FAMILY GATHERING: Monday, 4th December 2017.

Father: Late Mr. Kwame Oduro-Frimpong  
Mother: Mrs. Margaret Oduro  
Brothers: Ernest Oduro-Frimpong, Joseph Oduro-Frimpong, Richard Dompseh (Yaw Mensah), Benjamin Appiah Kwame Appiah, Kwadwo Dochi-Appiah  
Sisters: Irene Oduro-Appiah, Afia Doriwaa, Ama Asantewaa, Lydia Darkowaa, Abena Fosuua, Maa Abena, Gladys Appiah

**Aged: 52**

ALL FRIENDS & SYMPATHIZERS ARE CORDIALLY INVITED

Photo by author

Appendix III

**HONOURING HIS LIFE**  
In the hope of the Resurrection,

EMMANUEL NANA YAW AMPONG DARKWA  
June 19, 1958 - June 10, 2017

Funeral Arrangements: June 11, 2017 (Monday)  
Lying in State: June 11, 2017 at the Presbyterian Church Pastors, Accra  
Burial Service: June 12, 2017 at the Presbyterian Church, Akpan  
Final Funeral Rites: June 13, 2017 at the Funeral Ground, Akpan  
Thanksgiving Service: June 14, 2017 at the Presbyterian Church, Akpan

EMMANUEL NANA YAW AMPONG DARKWA  
June 19, 1958 - June 10, 2017

Photo by author



Appendix IV

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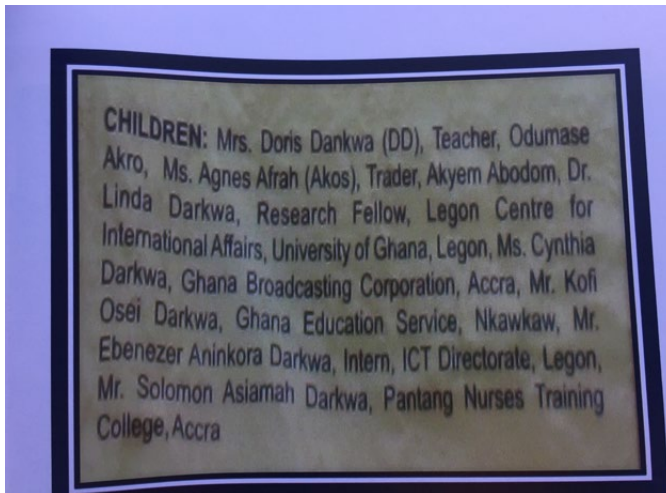


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