FUNERAL CUSTOMS OF THE GOLD COAST COLONY

[Since this article was in print, we have learnt with deep regret of the author's death. A note upon this will be found in our Editorial Notes.—Ed.]

THE usages connected with funerals are among the most deeply rooted of African customs. When a native of the Coast dies, the body is laid out as if in bed, and all the friends come to take their farewell, passing through the death-chamber, and on into the hall or yard, where drinks are provided and drums are beaten. The female mourners during this time wail and shriek and the males express their grief by various antics.

Meanwhile the coffin is prepared, and jewels and fine cloths are got ready to adorn the body for its last journey; while pigs and sheep are killed to feed all guests and strangers during the following eight days, the prescribed time for mourning and receiving condolences.

In some parts, the corpse is laid out to receive the last farewells of the relatives in a sitting posture, adorned in the finest cloths, and bedecked with valuable ornaments of gold or beads; even slaves are so adorned, but in their case the jewels are not buried with them.

The immediate family remain near the corpse, and the head of the family (whenever possible), or in his absence the senior member, receives two forms of notification :—

(1) Donations sent by intimate friends, as contributions towards the funeral expenses, which may take the form of (a) Essiadzi, or gifts to the family generally, or (b) Nsowa, or gifts to a particular member, whose name is mentioned, or to the deceased as from his children or widows. This difference is made as the expenses are apportioned amongst all the members of the family, and particular gifts go to assist that particular member to pay his share; these are not returnable,

whereas return gifts are made by the family to donors of Essiadzi when they in turn are bereaved.

(2) Notifications of debts due by the deceased. The creditor sends a flask of gin, and names the amount of the debt, together with a nominal donation of a shilling towards the expenses. If the family knew of the debt, from the deceased, this notification is binding on the members to pay it collectively, through their head, and the debt becomes part of the funeral expenses. If the family repudiates the debt as being unknown to them, this notification entitles the creditor to sue the heir, as principal, instead of the head of the family; this can only be done in the English courts, as, by native custom, there are always sureties to every debt, and the creditor must sue the surety, even if the principal is alive and present. It is a mere matter of form, as, when the creditor sues the surety, the family invariably pay the debt, nominally for the heir. In case of the sureties being dead, and the family repudiating, the debt was formerly written off as a bad one, although such a debt can now be recovered in an English court. These customs are the same in Denkera and Assin; further, if the deceased's property is small and his debts are big, it is usual for the family to pay some of the heavier debts before appointing the heir, leaving him to pay as much as they think he conveniently can, and the creditor, in such cases, generally remits a portion of the debt. If the creditor is absent when the debtor dies, his claim must be sent in within a reasonable time of his first learning of the death. If the creditor fails in this notification, the debt becomes extinct. The heir, however, may refuse to undertake the debt; in this case, he must do so at the time of his appointment, and in the presence of witnesses, of whom the head of the family should be one; the family then appoints another who is near of kin to take his place. In Fanti Yankumase (Assin Attandasu) such repudiation has been known to take place as long as three years after.

To return to our funeral, the day after death, or, in the case of wealthy men, two days (and in the case of chiefs three or four days after), the body is placed in the coffin, nude if a man, with only the shame-cloth if a woman, except, of

course, for jewellery. Next, a few personal articles are placed near the head, such as a comb, a towel, and pipe, together with gold dust, according to his wealth, and finally his best cloths, of velvet, silk, or cotton, are piled on top of the body. The lid is merely placed on, and the burial takes place inside the hut.

This burial in huts is fast dying out, and cemeteries are springing up even in bush villages.¹ In some parts each family has a "grove" or separate burial ground in the bush just outside the village. Where a burial takes place in a cemetery, the children, legitimate and otherwise, precede the coffin. If deceased is a man, his family follows the coffin, while his wives' families follow in their wake, singing his praises, and extolling the advantages of a large family of children; lastly, drums and friends complete the procession, and it is usual for women mourners to encircle the coffin, sweeping the air above and the ground beneath, with a short broom, to dispel all evil spirits and to give the deceased a smooth passage, accompanying their actions with weird howls, shrieks, and lamentations. Some women who follow mourning as a profession become very expert and graceful exponents.

The poorer people take their dead to burial merely wrapped in a cloth, which is suspended to a pole, the pole being borne on the shoulders of two men.

The crowd then returns to the house of mourning, to eat, drink, and fire guns, and a form of wake is kept up for eight days, at the end of which the family decides on a time for the final custom; this is generally about six weeks later at Cape Coast, and about a month in Assin and Denkeria, and it is usual to wear black during this period.

In the case of more important men, these periods are proportionately longer, the wake of a big chief being sometimes

¹ Among the Yaos of East Africa, burial inside the hut is quite common (or was a few years ago), but appears to be falling into disuse. The hut was shut up, and the outside of the roof draped (if the deceased was a wealthy man) with lengths of calico. This was done in the case of the chief Matope (near Blantyre), who died in 1893—and the white cloth made the hut a conspicuous landmark for many months afterwards. In this case the hut is allowed to fall into decay; but if the man is not buried in it, it is (or was) pulled down or burnt immediately after the funeral. If he possessed several, that of the chief wife, as being the one most identified with him, was the one destroyed.—ED.

kept up for two months, while his final custom is generally eight or nine months later.

At the final custom the families immediately concerned parade through the town, with their friends, to thank all those who have contributed funeral donations, and the deceased's family then appoints the heir, who should be the eldest surviving brother; or, failing brothers, the eldest sister's eldest son. The heir is necessarily one individual, and never joint.

If a man dies, his children, or if too young, the mothers' families for them, provide the coffin and a sum of money, together with the cloths that are placed in the coffin; the deceased's family bears all the other expenses, such as the rum, sheep, &c. The children by a concubine should share in the coffin expenses, but not equally; sometimes they refuse to do this, but send a donation direct to the father's family. In Denkera, I understand, both families share all the expenses.

On the other hand, when a woman dies, the husband provides the coffin, and burial cloths, while her family bears the general expenses. The dower is not paid over to the children but becomes the absolute property of the wife's parents on her death.

A man does not bury his wife or sweetheart: her family bears the whole expense, and he merely contributes a gift.

There is a peculiar custom in connection with the widow which is worth recording, as it appears general amongst all Fanti-speaking races. A wife, who has been divorced, takes no part whatever in the funeral. Otherwise, the widow (or widows) attends with dishevelled hair, and after the funeral she is taken to the beach by a number of old widows (Okunafo), and there she bathes; then she is taken back to the deceased's house, where she is confined to the death chamber during the eight-day custom. At midnight of the eighth day, she is again taken to the beach, carrying a pot of live embers on her head, and accompanied by the same widows, who scream out:

"Wonkyie, oh! Okunafo oreba."

"Look out, look out! A widow is coming."

At this signal all bystanders must make themselves scarce, or submit to a thrashing which the old ladies administer with great zeal.

The fire, an emblem of cleansing, is thrown into the sea, the new widow is ducked three times, and finally escorted home with the same shouts.

The widow has no claim at all on the husband's property and no claim could be made against her, but the heir, *i.e.*, the brother or nephew of the deceased, was formerly supposed to take her as one of his wives, and if he did not, she was free to marry anyone she pleased.

A woman holds her estate separately; on her decease her children—and eventually her family—are liable for her debts, not her husband, who is only bound to maintain her and pay for all medical comforts.

The heir, if a nephew, had the choice between the widow or her daughter, if she had one, but could not marry both. The brother could only marry the widow. The widow and her children have the right to reside in the deceased's house during good behaviour, and not merely during the pleasure of deceased's family.

In Cape Coast itself, a savage custom has quite recently been introduced, from the Kru Coast, of dancing on the coffin, while it is being carried through the street; this is almost entirely confined to Company funerals, and is done more or less to annoy some Company through whose land the funeral is passing (as explained in my article on the Company Customs), whereas the original Kru custom is simply a death dance.

The funeral of an Omanhin.

When an Omanhin dies, the greatest secrecy prevails, and as a rule it is only known to his immediate family. The body is placed on a bed sheet in the coffin, but instead of being nude, as in the case of a commoner, it is wrapped in the richest cloth, and the head rests on a pillow.

Inside the coffin, and near the head, are placed a pipe (if the chief was a smoker), or snuff, &c., and all his best jewels, together with flasks of gold dust, according to his wealth and position.

A quantity of fine cloths are then piled on the corpse, with a comb, a towel, fibre sponge, and other toilet requisites, and the lid rests unscrewed on the shell.

The coffin is filled and lowered into an open grave three or four days after death, the body having been embalmed in some way by a native doctor.

The actual burial takes place privately in an open grave, which is almost invariably in one of the compartments of the deceased chief's hut, although, in Kumase, the kings had a special burial place just outside the town, known as "Bantama," where a festival of that name was annually held. The Adai season is the general term applied to the time for annual offerings made to a person deceased.

Rum and eatables are put on a table in the room, with water and a certain amount of cooked food, and the door is locked.

In Cape Coast, about a fortnight later, a facsimile coffin is taken by the Gyasifo (or personal bodyguard of the chief) to the Adziwafo Danpanim (place of enstoolment) where the coffin is smeared with a mixture of rum, clay, and water, from the mound of swish. It is then paraded round the town as a public announcement of the Omanhin's death, and is finally carried back to the place of burial; here this spurious coffin is done away with.

The origin of the secrecy maintained with regard to an Omanhin's death, which involves his private burial and the mock funeral, appears to lie in the fear lest some enemy should surprise and seize the body for the sake of the skull, with which enemies adorn their war drums; but even this secret, like everything else in West Africa, leaks out long before the public announcement. "He is very, very ill," or, "sick unto death," is the usual reply from the family, who flatly deny the death, if reprimanded for not officially reporting it, which they are supposed to do.

In Cape Coast, No. 3 Company, evolved from the royal No. 4 Company, form the Gyasifo. Elsewhere this bodyguard is generally formed from the members of the Omanhin's family, his personal retainers, and his slaves.

After the public announcement, the family fixes the date of the public funeral custom, which is from six to nine months

later, according to the importance of the deceased. The reason of this is to give all members of the family, as well as his people and friends, who may be at a distance, a chance to attend the custom; and as nothing is done out here in a hurry, it takes quite this time for his sub-chiefs to make up their minds to attend.

All this while the grave remains open, but the door of the hut is locked, and the key kept by the head of the family. This again varies in different parts, as in Assin (*e.g.*) the grave is built over with sticks and swish plastered over them, at the original interment, and not again opened; whereas in Kumase the Bantama consisted of a number of cells, at the end of a long passage, each of which contained the mortal remains of a king, and as soon as putrefaction had done its work, the bones of the skeleton were joined together with gold wire; these, at the Bantama custom, were made to sit up, while the reigning monarch personally sacrificed a human victim and daubed the skeleton with his blood. Further, in Ashanti, the head of a dead monarch was detached, if there was an important war on, and sent to the front, wrapt in a leopard's skin (the emblem of Ashanti royalty), to carry victory with the army. The only recorded case of such a trophy having been lost, was in the battle of Dodowa, on August 7th, 1826, when a head, so preserved, was captured; this was at first taken to be that of Sir Charles McCarthy, who had been killed at the battle of Essamankwa on January 21st, 1824, and it was sent as such to England, where it was almost immediately discovered to be the skull of the late King Osai Tutu Kwamina.

When the time fixed for the custom arrives, there is the usual drumming, and a long procession through the town; the women move about in bodies howling and crying, and knock together two sticks as clappers, one held in each hand; the men express their mourning by taking frequent potions of palm-wine, or rum.

The family of the late chief head the procession, with their heads shorn; next to them comes the sacrificial cow, carrying all the money that is to be spent on the custom tied round its neck; after it are rolled the puncheons of rum that are to

be imbibed, the number of which varies with the wealth of the family, as well as with the number of donations received; lastly the State drums close the official part of the procession.

This ends at the late Omanhin's house, where the door of the grave-chamber is opened, and the hair of all the shorn heads is cast into the grave, as a sign that all those now living will eventually follow the deceased.¹

While this is being done, the cow is killed, as well as some sheep and pigs, and the flesh of these, with rum, is distributed to each street in the town, and a portion is sent to each Company post, where it is soon finished.

The procession only takes place on the first day, but the rest of the "custom" of drumming, drinking, and brawling continues for about six weeks, and the town gives itself up to every form of excess.

At the end of the Custom the grave is built over with sticks and swish (mud), or with an iron grating, as in the case of King Aggrey of Cape Coast, or by simply locking the house; but mud is never thrown on to the shell of an Omanhin, except when the covering falls in from natural decay. Fresh food and drink is put into the room before it is finally closed.

Human sacrifices were an essential part of a big funeral custom, but these differed from the ordinary form of sacrifice, in that the blood had to be spilt into the grave; consequently the victim was stunned and dragged, or carried, to the house, instead of being marched to the place of sacrifice with his cheeks pierced by a dagger.

The Abrafo (executioners) went about in a body to hunt down their victims, who were invariably strangers residing in, or passing through, the town; these were secured by

¹ This rite is observed by tribes in other parts of Africa. Among the Yaos, the relatives shave their heads after the funeral ceremonies are completed. "Some of the hair is buried at the place where the house of the deceased stood"—which is taken down if the deceased is not buried inside it; see Duff Macdonald, *Africana*, Vol. I, p. 110; see also the Rev. A. G. MacAlpine's paper on "Tonga Religious Beliefs and Customs," in the JOURNAL for April, 1906, where it is stated (p. 262) that the hair shaved off by the mourners was burnt in a fire specially kindled by friction (which is not usually done) for the occasion.—ED.

stealth, and usually about midnight, by arrangement with their hosts !

Women fell victims at these orgies as well as men, but they were treated differently.

When a man was doomed, he was knocked on the head with a bludgeon, and his body was carried to the grave; here his head was hacked off by the abrafo whose victim he was, and the blood run into the grave. The victim's trunk was then taken and thrown into the bush, where it was soon reduced to a skeleton by vultures or hyænas. The heads were sometimes piled on the coffin, or were cleaned and kept by the respective abrafo, as trophies, and these individuals ranked according to the number of victims of whom each could boast.

In the case of women no blood was drawn; they were stunned and taken to the grave, where the inanimate body was placed on the ground, face down; a stick, used as a pestle for beating corn in the mortar into "fufu," was then placed over the nape of the neck and held down by some of the abrafo, while others threw the body upwards and backwards so as to break the neck. The body was divested of all clothing, except the "Amoase" (shame-cloth), the coffin was withdrawn, and the body placed under it. Here again custom varied in different tribes, as in some parts these women were buried in a separate grave, and this variation was probably rendered necessary by the greater number of victims sacrificed.

(The *amoase* or shame-cloth is a fold of cloth which passes between the legs, supported in front and behind by a rope of beads round the waist. In olden times this was the only article which adorned the female form, but a higher civilisation now prescribes a cloth wound round the waist, with another of equal size thrown loosely round the shoulders.)

The abrafo took the cloths of all the victims, and divided each cloth up, equally, amongst themselves; some fragments they tied as garlands round their heads, whilst others were made into charms to rest the spirits of the victims, so that they would not disturb the peace of their slayers.

Men were sacrificed to accompany the deceased into the

next world as his slaves; the bigger the status of the chief, the greater was the number necessary to minister to his wants when he joined his ancestors.

The women were murdered to take the place of his wives, and as the average Omanhin had not many wives, women strangers stood a better chance of their lives than the men; as a rule, three or four were considered sufficient for this purpose, although I do not know how many were necessary in the case of the King of Ashanti, whose quota in life was three thousand three hundred and thirty-three!

In most Fanti-speaking tribes, the chief's favourite wife had to die with him, and this was easily accomplished, as the favourite generally attended him whenever he was ill, and if the illness proved fatal, it was incumbent on any persons who were present to strangle the wretched woman the moment he expired. In answer to my question, I was informed quite seriously that there was not much competition for the post of favourite when the chief was known to be very ill, but that if she were highly connected, or had large property, this ceremony was dispensed with, and the chief had to lack his wife, or sometimes a slave was strangled over the corpse as a substitute.

This wife was, in Assin and other parts, buried in a separate grave. Also in Fanti Yankumase the male victims were not decapitated, but had their throats cut, and were buried in a grave at some distance from that of the chief.

When a chief dies away from his principal residence, the secret is more easily kept, and his body is carried home at night. If a chief or big captain died during a campaign, the body was carried with the army until its return home; it was preserved for this purpose, by being slowly smoked over a wood fire, which had the effect of mummifying the flesh.

The foregoing was the procedure followed in Cape Coast, and is roughly what was common to all the Twi speaking races in the Gold Coast and Ashanti, with slight local variations.

In Ashanti, slaves of war were the principal victims, although it was essential to include a freeman. To gain this end, an artifice was resorted to, bystanders being asked to

assist in lowering the coffin, and while this was being done one was clubbed on the back of the head, so that he fell into the grave, and was left there till he died, after which the grave was filled in. In the case of an important commoner, the earth was thrown in at once, so that if the man had not been immediately killed by the blow, he was buried alive.

In Akwapem, I was told the only woman who was killed, at the death of the Omanhin, was the best-looking virgin in the town, who was buried alive, not even being stunned, under the coffin.

The object of burying all their wealth with deceased persons is explained by the fact that, (a), in the case of a chief, if the stool is ever in jeopardy, the family, with the advice of the councillors, may dig the buried property up after an expensive ceremony, which includes the killing of one or more cows, with sheep, and slaves; but this may only be done in the direst necessity. (b) In the case of anyone else, it can only be done by unanimous consent of the whole family convened for the occasion, in order to give a start in life to the eldest son of the head of the house, if he is a very promising youth, and if the family is too poor to help him and themselves. Two sheep are usually considered sufficient, in a case of this sort, to reconcile the manes of the defunct to the desecration, but a solemn oath is invariably sworn to replace double the amount as soon as possible, and the replacing is accompanied by the same sacrifices.

I have culled the above information during the last five years on the Coast, and have done my best to verify all the details both from the principal people, and several of the Amanhin with whom I have come more intimately in contact. At first I found them mute, owing to my putting my questions in the present and future, but they always thawed when asked to describe only what took place in the past. However, there is no doubt that sacrifices are still continued on the death of a big chief, in spite of the most strenuous efforts on the part of the Government to suppress them, although sheep have taken the place of human beings in all other cases.

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