

# KOUYA FUNERALS

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## Introduction

The Kouya (or Sokuya as they refer to themselves) live in West Central Côte d'Ivoire, in twelve villages around the town of Vavoua. Surrounded by larger and more powerful ethnic groups, the Kouya, who number about 10,000 nonetheless have a very strong sense of group identity. Agriculture is the main economic activity in the Kouya area, with some coffee and cocoa plantations in addition to fields of bananas, ground nuts, maize and yams. The Kouya have no regular celebrations such as harvest or planting festivals, the only real time of celebration and joy comes, somewhat surprisingly, during funerals. This paper aims to give an overview of Kouya funeral rites. I will examine the various stages of the rituals before looking at some of the social and economic implications of these customs to Kouya society as a whole.

## Funeral Stages

Kouya funerals can be divided into a distinct series of stages.

- 1) Announcement of the Death.
- 2) Displaying the body.
- 3) The Burial.
- 4) Intermission.
- 5) Ceremony of the eighth day.
- 6) Ongoing ceremonies.

## **ANNOUNCEMENT**

Under normal circumstances a funeral director (my term) is appointed who has the responsibility of coordinating all aspects of the funeral, including announcing the death. Deaths are usually made public in the evening when people are at home in the village. Thus if someone dies during the day, the body is hidden in the house of the funeral director until he can return from the fields and tell people about the death. The funeral director may fire a gun into the air to inform people that someone has died. As soon as they hear of the death people start to wail and cry out.

An exception to this rule is the death of a child which is announced immediately. One of my informants attributes this to the fact that a woman can't hold her grief when her child dies and will cry immediately - giving the game away.

In the case of a man who danced the sacred mask, the *jɔ*, as soon as the village is advised of the death, the women hide themselves in the bush or in their houses and the *jɔ* is brought out. The mask is danced all round the village and then returns to the bush. The women are then free to come out of hiding and start their mourning. This mask seems to be of Gouro origin, it is believed that any woman who sees the mask will die within a short while.

If the person dies away from home, news is brought to the village as soon as possible. Wherever possible, people are buried in their own village (or their husband's village in the case of a married woman). The body of someone who dies in Vavoua or a neighbouring town would normally be brought back to the village by the *service des pompes funebres* of the town concerned. However, when someone dies in one of the villages, the young men of the family concerned may will go and fetch the body themselves, carrying it on their shoulders back to the village, this is especially the case when finances are low. When a person

dies a long way from home, say in Abidjan, then the body would normally be buried there; only a rich family could afford the expense of moving a body over that distance.

Once the death is announced, it is necessary to notify family members who live elsewhere. The person in charge of the funeral will delegate, generally, young to carry the message to other villages. The news can be given directly to a man or to a family group; but because of the propensity of women on these occasions it is usual to inform a woman of a death of a family member through one or two intermediaries. Normally one of the intermediaries would be the woman's husband.

In many situations, the "funeral director" will not yet have been chosen and this entails a few changes to the ideal situation as described above. People do give instructions about their funerals in advance, including naming the funeral director. Once the person is dead, however, his wishes may well be ignored. In particular, the person allocated to be funeral director may refuse to do it, the position is one of great responsibility and involves no small financial outlay and as such is not very popular. Alternatively, the deceased may not have named who he wants to officiate at his funeral; in such cases, the responsibility, in theory, falls on the oldest surviving male relative. What actually happens is that all of the older male relatives argue about who should do the job and eventually brow beat someone into the position. Until such time as a funeral director is appointed, the oldest male relative or an ad-hoc committee of relatives will perform the *folles* outlined above.

### ***Laying out the body.***

Until the ceremony of the eighth day, the soul (zuzu) of the departed is still in the village, indeed it is quite possible to meet the person who has died walking around the village. I have heard a number of stories of people meeting a friend or relative who has just died and being given information that could only have come from that person.

During this time the body itself is the focus of attention, being displayed on a bed for all to see, friends and relatives talk to the body in order to communicate with the deceased.

As soon as the death is announced, the young men of the *quartier* build a shade of palm branches in the courtyard where the body is to be displayed. The shade is used only for the funeral and is pulled down when all of the festivities are finished. The body is then washed and dressed in his (or her) best clothes and arrayed on a bed under the shade. For the funeral of Touali Bita, the village chief, it was a group of young men who dressed the body but only after they had been paid 5,000? francs. Normally this duty falls on the family, but Bita had been given an injection of formulin and the smell was so strong in the enclosed space of the house that only the hardiest could withstand it for more than a few seconds.

When the body is laid out, some of the deceased's possessions may be put on the bed beside him; framed photographs are often displayed. A dancer or woodworker's masks are displayed by the body. Bita's family displayed his photograph, his hat and a manuscript of James in Kouya which he had been in the habit of reading regularly.

The shade, with the displayed body is now the focus of all activity. Many people come just to look at the body, while others come to ask for messages to be passed on the ancestors. While the is laid out, the extended family from the village (represented by those who live in the same *quartier*) along with any female relations from other villages stay in the courtyard close to the body. Each extended family has a group of tam-tam players who play and sing more or less non-stop all of the time the body is displayed. People dance a slow shuffling dance in a circle, often around the bed if access is clear on all four sides.

This dancing carries on day and night until the burial. In the case of someone who is rich or important, the family will be supplemented by many other mourners and musicians and dancers will come along to perform (they are given money as they perform as well as receiving palm wine and beer). During Bita's funeral, the musicians included a rock group from Déma, two groups dancing with masks (walâl from Gouabafila and wâlâ from Dediafila) and someone referred to as a leopard man from Gbagbo, a Niedaboua

village some distance away. When the chief of Gbagbo died, the dancers from Gouabafla hired a bush taxi and danced for his funeral; returning very annoyed that they did not earn enough to cover their expenses.

### The Women Arrive

As I said above, female relatives from all over will attend the funeral (men only come for the later stages). The women travel long distances, often on foot to attend a funeral and may be away from their husband's village for a week or more. When a number of deaths occur in different villages at the same time (as is often the case during the Harmattan) then women may go from one funeral to another without ever returning home. A woman will not return to her husband's courtyard even if she is attending a funeral in the same village; rather she will stay in the *quartier* where the funeral is taking place, returning home when it is all over. (Note: marriage between two people from the same *quartier* is forbidden, the *quartier* being regarded as the basic unit of the extended family, so it would be rare for a woman to attend a funeral for a member of her own family that took place in her husband's *quartier*.) The women from a particular village often arrive at the funeral together, gathering outside of the village and then walking through the village singing and bursting out in a collective show of grief when they arrive in the courtyard.

## Grieving

Grieving starts from the moment the death is announced but reaches its peak at the time when the body is brought out on display, the sight of the body naturally enough, bringing further grief to the surface. The manner of displaying grief is different for men and women but in both cases it seems to be highly stylised. The men bow their heads and clench their fists in front of their faces, walking around seemingly at random with a slow and deliberate gait, almost seeming to stamp. As they walk around, they weep loudly and may cry out their sadness and despair at the death - occasionally someone will call out allegations of sorcery as they mourn. The women in their turn are much more dramatic, on first hearing the news of a death, they tear off their clothes and roll on the ground crying. Within a short while, they change into specific funeral clothes and cake themselves with mud. The clothes the women wear during the funeral seem to serve to illustrate their grief. By their manner of dress and caking themselves in mud, the women seem to illustrate their special status as mourners. Until the funeral is over, they wear very torn old clothing that generally leaves the breasts uncovered. I have observed women wearing men's clothing to mourn in, on two occasions, which would seem to be a strong illustration of the special status of women at funerals, although in each case, the women left the jacket they were wearing open, exposing their breasts and seeming to demonstrate that despite their clothing they were indeed women. See the note on clothing below under "Ongoing Ceremonies".

To the onlooker, the grieving seems at times artificial; especially the way that some people appear to go to and from perfect lucidity to hysterical grief in a short time. Of course it is unfair to try and judge the extent of someone's grief, but people have remarked to me that if you do not grieve loudly, others may say that you are not sorry for the death and maybe even that you are the sorcerer responsible for it.

## Sorcery?

If it is suspected that a sorcerer is responsible for the death, then a ceremony (*la levée du corps* in French) may be performed to detect who should be blamed. The mother and father of the deceased hide themselves somewhere in the village. The body is then shouldered by two or more people and told to find the parents, it then leads the people carrying it, by turn, to the hiding places of its mother and father. The authenticity of the ceremony thus established, the body is told to find the person who killed him. The body then designates someone (or perhaps a number of people) who is responsible for his death. The person who is thus inculpated may be attacked on the spot and beaten senseless, otherwise they may be subject to an *auto da fe*, such as drinking the fluid which runs from the putrefying body. In such a case, the person is guilty of sorcery if he lives, death or severe illness is proof of innocence. These days, a person who is beaten on accusation of being a sorcerer has recourse to the courts for restitution, but equally someone who admits to sorcery is liable to a civil penalty.

Perhaps because of their tendency to have a violent outcome, these ceremonies are rarely practised today. Here, in Gouabafla, Touali Bitá forbade the *levee du corps* when he became chief. Since he died, one death has been definitely blamed on sorcery, but still no *levee du corps* was performed. Some said this was out of respect to Bitá, others said it was in order to avoid shame falling on the family of the culprit(s). I suspect that a combination of the two is the truth.

The body is thus left out on display for three days and nights in the case of a woman and four days and nights in the case of a man. There is a similar period of three days for a woman and four for a man between the burial and the last day of the funeral. This matches a pattern of three or four days, between birth and naming for girl and boy babies, respectively. This pattern of three for a woman and four for a man is the opposite of that found among the Chumburung of Ghana by Gillian Hansford. During this time the financial arrangements between families which are pertinent to burying the body should be carried out. If all is in order, then the burial may be performed earlier than usual (especially if the corpse smells badly) or if arrangements are not in order, the burial may be delayed. (See below).

## Children

The bodies of children, unlike those of adults, are not displayed at all but are buried immediately. It is said that if a child who is not yet weaned is not buried immediately, then the milk will come out of his nostrils. It was mentioned above that when a first child dies, then the parents must not weep; this is because he has gone to call other children for you and if you weep, they may not come. A first child is buried unclothed. Under normal circumstances, a child should be buried in his paternal village. If the child dies in his maternal village and must be buried there, then *pagnes*, representing clothes for the body must be sent in payment to the paternal village.

The parents of a dead child wash themselves on the grave the night after the burial.

A stillborn child is not even brought into the village but is buried in the bush where he was delivered. Likewise, a woman who dies in childbirth is buried in the bush, she is said to have died in combat. In this case, the women perform a dance which seems to be their equivalent of the "jɛ". A warning is sounded and the men have to hide themselves in the bush or in the houses and the women then dance, unclothed around the village. There does not seem to be a need for the husband to pay his wife's family in the case. The women also have a similar ceremony to protect themselves from death in childbirth, it involves sacrificing cola nuts and then dancing naked round the village, again the men are expected to hide themselves away during the dance.

## Burial

Before the actual burial takes place, a financial reckoning must take place; this is referred to as paying for the body. A husband is expected to pay a certain sum, (around 10,000 francs) to his wife's family before he is allowed to bury the body. Likewise, a man's brothers or children and in particular the funeral director must pay his maternal family before he can be buried. In the case of the husband, any outstanding dowry payments must also be made. The family to whom money is owed gather together and make their demands to the person who is due to pay them through a third party. In practice, the family are not expected to pay the full amount that is owed and the body will be released for burial on receipt of a token down payment. If the payment is not forthcoming, then permission will not be given to bury the body which will be allowed to putrefy in the open air. If the husband attempts to bury his wife without the permission of her family then a fight could ensue which may result in the body being torn apart.

If the family are rich enough, then the corpse will be put in a coffin, if not, it is lowered into the ground wrapped up in *pagnes*. Into the coffin (or the grave) are placed *pagnes* and perhaps the deceased's machette. Some people put gifts in and ask the dead person to give them to their ancestors. The grave itself may be more or less ornate depending on the wealth of the family. The actual burial is usually performed by a group of young men who carry the coffin to the grave and lower it in. The same men may have dug the grave or it may have been done by the family; each family has its own plot for graves. A collection is

usually made at the graveside to pay for the burial. Occasionally, when the burial ground is by a road, the young men may block the road, only allowing traffic to pass on payment of a small sum. This money must be placed on the floor rather than in the hands of the collector - indicating that it is for the deceased. In fact, it is usually used to provide liquid refreshment for the burial party.

## ***Intermission***

Between the burial and ceremony of the eighth day, there is a lull in the proceedings, during which people rest, go off to the fields to fetch food and generally more or less return to normal life. During this time, many (though not all) of the people who have been sleeping around the body will return to their own courtyards to sleep for a few nights. The drumming and dancing continue but in a much subdued fashion.

## ***Ceremony Of The Eighth Day***

I have used this term "Ceremony of the Eighth Day" even though it might not be chronologically accurate; this is in keeping with the French terminology used on Radio Cote d'Ivoire for announcements of funerals.

In Kouya, the term is "*yli yoo sa*" which means to lift one's eyes from the road. The ceremony serves to mark the transition where the soul of the dead moves from being in or around the village to the place of the dead. The location or nature of the place where the dead stay is not at all clear and in all probability there is no real consensus as to what happens. Some say that the dead go to be with God and others that he has gone to be with his ancestors. The belief that the dead person is reunited with his ancestors seems to be universal, but this is the limit of agreement on the subject.

The "*yli yoo sa*" takes place on the third night after the burial (after two full days have passed) in the case of a woman and on the fourth night for a man. During the day, the young women collect money to pay for drinks and to pay drummers to play for them. The whole night is then spent in singing and dancing. While everyone joins in, the young women do seem to have a special if uncertain significance in the proceedings.

The following day, an animal is killed and a large meal is eaten, this more or less marks the end of the funeral as such. Some describe the killing of the animal as a sacrifice, although others say that it is just so as to cook a good meal for the visitors before they go (although close family members are required to stay longer). I suspect that the reality is that it is a sacrifice, the significance of which is in the process of being lost. On the same day, the children of the deceased are washed and have their heads shaved, again marking the end of the funeral proper.

If it is a married man who has died, other men will bring presents to the "*yli yoo sa*" in order to court his widow.

## ***Ongoing Ceremonies***

While the *yli yoo sa* marks the end of the funeral *per se*, certain other things concerned with the death still continue.

## ***Role of the women***

During the funeral itself, all of the women present gather together to dance around the village. Dressed in their ragged clothes and caked with mud, they perform a waddling walk with their arms and derrieres swaying in time to the mourning songs that they sing. They trace a route around the courtyard where the body is lying following the larger roads in the village. This is done many times a day during the funeral and afterwards with decreasing frequency. They also agree together to visit other villages to dance in the hope of raising money. After the "*yli yoo sa*" there are fewer women in the village, but those who are left continue to dance for a few more days. Even months later, the women from the village may dance around the village occasionally. The reason for this is unclear; certainly whatever original significance it had has been lost. When asked why this is done, answers vary from: for happiness (women enjoy funerals), for sadness (at the death) and most commonly - because our ancestors handed it down to us like this.

Women relatives of the deceased may stay in the village for a long period of time. Daughters (which includes nieces) will stay for three months when it is their mother who has died and four when it is the father. Even then they are not considered free to go until their husbands have contributed as often considerable sum to the funeral director. Six months after arriving for the funeral of Bita, his brother's daughters are still in Gouabafila, their father forbidding them to return to their husbands until each one provides sixty thousand francs.

As has been noted above, the women wear torn clothes during the funeral, the close female relatives are expected to continue wearing torn clothes for four months after the death in the case of a man and for three months when a woman dies. After this, she must buy a *pagne noir*, a dark coloured *pagne*, which should have at least some black in it. The women may decide as a group to all buy the same pattern of cloth. The *pagne noir* is worn for up to a year, until a male relative, father, uncle or brother, buys a new *pagne* to replace it.

## **Distribution of Possessions**

Women generally have few possessions and so in their cases, the question does not arise. In the case of a man, then whoever takes charge of the funeral also takes possession of all the deceased's goods. Then a number of months later, a family council will be held in which all of the possessions are displayed and the funeral director distributes his goods and his fields among the children and brothers of the deceased.

## **Significance of Funerals in the life of the Kouya**

### ***Ritual Significance***

Apart from New Year, which is celebrated with a good deal of enthusiasm, the Kouya do not seem to have any major festivals; there is no equivalent of the Yam Festival which happens in the south, for instance. In this situation, funerals perform an important social role in addition to their serving as a rite of passage. Funerals seem to have three functions within the society, social, financial and ritual.

The ritual aspect of the funeral is the hardest to identify and define. Much of the original significance of events appears to have been lost, if indeed there ever were a significance. On inquiry, one is forever coming across the answer "because that is how we do it", or perhaps "that is how our fathers did it". The funeral seems to reflect the view that death is a process rather than an event. The time between the actual death and the "*yli yoo sa*" marking a liminality or transition from physical life to the afterlife - whatever that may mean to the Kouya. The place of burial; in the home village for a man or the husband's village for a married woman appears to draw a link between the person and his surroundings (see below on the financial aspect). The desire of urban Kouyas to be married in their village is very strong, showing that the links with the city, though strong, are perhaps not as emotionally or even spiritually strong as those with the village. As many as ten per cent of Kouyas live away from the Kouya area, a very high proportion of these being well-educated young and middle-aged men. If over a number of generations these people cut their links with the villages to the extent of no longer desiring to be buried there, then perhaps they could be considered to have lost their identity as Kouyas.

### ***Social Significance***

The social aspect of funerals, on the other hand, is very obvious. Despite the very real grief which is naturally enough present at a funeral, many people do thoroughly enjoy themselves. Quite simply, the opportunity to spend a few days eating, drinking and dancing is very attractive. For women especially, funerals are an enjoyable time. Their daily lives are ones of constant drudgery, working in the fields and then returning home in the evening to cook (while the men relax and gossip) and then wash the children before going to sleep themselves. All of these responsibilities can be left behind when a woman goes to a funeral. The men say that women go to funerals to drink and sleep with other men, whether this is true or

not, I don't know - the women aren't saying. It is very obvious to the casual observer, that except for those who are closely touched by the event, a funeral is a most enjoyable holiday.

The woman also has an opportunity to reassert her identity as part of her father's family. Although married and living with her husband, a woman is always part of her father's family (at least until her own death when she is buried as part of her husband's family). A family funeral allows the bonds with her paternal family to be strengthened as she will spend a great deal of time with her sisters and other family members who, in the normal course of events, she would rarely see.

### ***Financial Significance***

Financially, funerals are a great strain on the family. The simple cost of the funeral itself, entertaining visitors, paying the burial party and the cost of offerings to go into the tomb is huge. This is to some extent offset by the belongings of the deceased being transferred to the funeral director, on whom most of these costs fall. Of course, the funeral director only has temporary control over the belongings, so in the long term, he stands to lose a good deal of money. To help defray these costs, other family members are expected to bring money and perhaps an animal for meat to the funeral. In particular, the sons-in-law are expected to provide substantially for the funeral, their wives not being returned to them until they have given what is considered an adequate sum. This financial burden is greatly felt by the husband; in one case, a man attempted to hide news of the death of his wife's brother from her for fear of the obligation that this would place on him.

This debt to the wife's family is an ongoing one, and can be seen as an extension to the dowry (more properly bride price) which the husband must pay in order to marry in the first place. This ongoing debt is viewed as a recompense to the wife's family for the loss of the children which, when born to the wife, will belong to the husband's family rather than the wife's. This reaches its final and logical extension in the tradition of paying for the body. As has been mentioned above, a woman does not finally make the transfer to her husband's family until she dies and is buried in his village (in this sense the whole of married life could be viewed as a liminality phase). This final transfer can only take place upon payment of a large sum, paying for the body. Even so, the debt is still not fully paid. Male children born to the wife are part of the husband's family but they too are considered to have a link with the maternal family. Certainly they will spend a good deal of their childhood in their maternal village (Not least when the mother goes to funerals). Thus when a child of the marriage dies, even if he dies in old age, a sum must be paid to his maternal family before he can be buried and thus irrevocably located in his paternal village (again, the funeral director is usually responsible for paying this debt which, in the case of Bitá amounted to 200,000 francs and a cow). In this view, buying the body is more properly a part of the marriage customs, although it, of necessity, takes place during a funeral. The debt incurred by a husband to his wife's family is not fully paid up until the end of the next generation.

The financial strain imposed on Kouya families by their funeral practices is extreme. Not only are there the obligations towards various family members mentioned above, but status can be gained by staging a large funeral, so each family attempts to outdo their neighbours with more and more lavish celebrations. As a result many Kouya people face real economic hardship. It is almost impossible for a Kouya to run a financial enterprise in their own area, funeral obligations would soon use up all of the available capital. Village shops and grinding mills are virtually all in the hands of non-Kouyas. Likewise, Kouya men are often obliged to sell their fields, or at least to loan them to others for money, with little hope of ever getting them back. Once more it seems that well over half the land in the area is now owned or farmed by non-Kouyas.

It is not unusual to hear rumours that people refused to spend money on medicine for a sick relative, because they needed to keep the money in reserve for his funeral. Young men often complain that they have no decent clothes to wear, but they know that once they are dead, they will be buried with some expensive cloth.

Dédy Séri Faustin, writing about funerals among the Bété, an ethnic group closely linked to the Kouya, remarks that funerals are a social response to the disorder caused by a death and as such have an important purpose, but the financial and moral aspects of contemporary Bété funerals mean that they now serve overall to impoverish the Bété people. The same could be equally said for Kouya funerals, their important role in providing social cohesion is now overshadowed by the huge financial constraints they place on the Kouya society.

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