Africa (2023), **93**, 293–309
doi:10.1017/S0001972023000256

IAI AFRICA

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Burying at all costs: investing in funerals in southern Benin

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Abstract

Drawing on research conducted in southern Benin since 2000, this article explores the entanglements between grief, social status and funerals, and accounts for the conditions and the motives of the massive and multifarious investments – inextricably psychic, social and economic – in funerals that can be witnessed locally. I argue that, far from being mere 'conspicuous consumption', funeral expenses should be understood as the product of a number of intersecting dynamics, as the lavishness of these events cannot conceal the burden they represent and the anxieties they feed. In fact, filial duties and politics of reputation often entwine to give an existential dimension to these occasions, reinforcing one another to lead social subjects to engage important economic means and to bury their dead 'at all costs'. In fact, as internalized norms and social pressures finally convince most mourners to organize obsequies beyond their means, the psychic and social tensions of funerals regularly constitute the all too common hidden face of the more commonly reported lavishness.

Résumé

S'appuyant sur des travaux menés dans le Sud du Bénin depuis 2000, cet article explore les imbrications entre la douleur du deuil, le statut social et les funérailles, et explique les conditions et les motifs des investissements massifs et divers (inextricablement psychiques, sociaux et économiques) dans les funérailles auxquelles on peut assister localement. L'auteur soutient que les dépenses funéraires sont loin de n'être que simple « consommation ostentatoire » et qu'elles sont à comprendre comme le produit d'un certain nombre de dynamiques intercroisées, la prodigalité de ces événements ne pouvant dissimuler la charge qu'ils représentent et les anxiétés qu'ils nourrissent. En réalité, les obligations filiales et les politiques de réputation s'entrelacent souvent pour donner une dimension existentielle à ces occasions, en se renforçant mutuellement pour amener des sujets sociaux à engager des moyens économiques importants et à enterrer leur mort « à tout prix ». De fait, puisque les normes internalisées et les pressions sociales finissent par convaincre la plupart des proches du défunt à organiser des obsèques au-dessus de leurs moyens, les tensions psychiques et sociales des funérailles constituent régulièrement la face trop souvent cachée de la prodigalité plus communément constatée.

Resumo

Com base na investigação realizada no sul do Benim desde 2000, este artigo explora os enredos entre o luto, o estatuto social e os funerais, e dá conta das condições e dos motivos dos investimentos maciços e multifacetados – inextricavelmente psíquicos, sociais e económicos – em funerais que podem ser testemunhados localmente. Defendo que, longe de serem mero 'consumo conspícuo', as despesas funerárias devem ser entendidas como o produto de uma série de dinâmicas de intersecção, uma vez que a sumptuosidade destes acontecimentos não pode esconder o fardo que representam e as ansiedades que alimentam. De facto, deveres filiais e políticas de reputação entrelaçam-se frequentemente para dar uma dimensão existencial a estas ocasiões, reforçando-se mutuamente para levar os sujeitos sociais a empenharem-se em meios económicos importantes e a enterrarem os seus mortos 'a todo o custo'. De facto, à medida que as normas internalizadas e as pressões sociais finalmente convencem a maioria das pessoas enlutadas a organizar exéquias para além dos seus meios, as tensões psíquicas e sociais dos funerais constituem regularmente a face oculta demasiado comum da sumptuosidade mais comummente relatada.

Introduction: being invested

In southern Benin, as in many other parts of Africa, funerals are grand affairs that receive much social attention and mobilize important resources. This article explores the complex interlacing of issues of grief, concerns for social status and funeral expenses, in order to account for the massive, multifaceted investments in burial ceremonies that occur locally. I argue that these investments, here approached, following Bourdieu, 'in the double sense of psychoanalysis and of the economy' (Bourdieu 1998: 77–8), must be understood as costly conducts of honour that are situated at the intersection of different dynamics, beyond the conspicuous consumption that is visible to all, social scientists and local subjects alike. In fact, because of the multifarious social relations at play, investments here are inextricably affective and economic, and the lavish dimension of funeral performances should not conceal their existential dimension, the burden they represent and the source of anxiety they constitute. Nor should the lavishness overshadow the concern for the departed that may be found in such funerals, entwined with other motivations and aims. In that respect, people are actually invested in funerals – socially and psychically – as much as they invest in them – in time, energy and money.

The second half of the 1980s saw the gradual emergence of new ways of exploring African funerals. They became increasingly viewed as key sites from which to explore social distinction (Vidal 1986), the complexities of belonging and community identity (Gilbert 1988; Lentz 1994), or the multifaceted intersections of the rhetorics of modernity and tradition, as they unfolded in claims over dead bodies (Cohen and Odhiambo 1992). Such works have paved the way to what can probably be considered a more political anthropology of African funerals, or at least an anthropology of the politics of funerals, exploring the multi-layered backstages of the ritual scenes and the making of funeral performances. Therefore, since the 1990s, in a corpus at first mostly centred on West Africa, funerals have been used more and more regularly as a productive lens through which to look at critical social forces at work in contemporary Africa, as a key site from which broader dynamics can be observed and deciphered,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972023000256 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and as crucial social events in changing African societies, where, for instance, both ambivalent solidarities and patronage relationships, as well as senses of community and social distinctions, are re-enacted and reinstituted (Boni 2010; de Witte 2001: 51–80; Fumanti 2007; Geschiere 2005; Smith 2004; Lentz 2009; Page 2007).[1]

In the last decade, research has continuously emphasized how funerals stand at the heart of the (re)production of social and moral orders, as crucial sites in the making of religious coexistence (Werbner 2018; Onoma 2019), as key moments in quests for dignified lives – even in disrupted times and adverse conditions, such as the AIDS pandemic in Swaziland (Golomski 2018) – but also as occasions of momentous moral claims and tensions in the face of death (Bähre 2020: 140–64), and even as defining loci of moral outcasts, as in the 'deaths without mourning' of Cameroonian homosexuals (Ndjio 2020).

In enlarging the picture and looking beyond the ritual settings into the unfolding of social relationships surrounding funeral events, this literature has also actively engaged with the social experience of funerals, questioning what they stand for and what they represent in the lives of the people who, more often than not, engage so vibrantly in them. In a precursory article, Claudine Vidal (1986) highlighted, for instance, how funerals were a 'passionate sociodrama' with an existential dimension in urban Côte d'Ivoire in the 1980s, where relatively well-off urbanites strove to save face and maintain recognition of their class position (and their social distance from poorer strata of society) in distinguishing and distinguished funerals. In fact, funeral occasions have social salience throughout the social spectrum and in diverse African situations. It is probably worth noting the early contributions of African scholars – which were more directly and practically immersed within the social passions of funerals – to the renewed interest in funerals at the turn of the 1990s (for instance, Lawuyi 1991; Tingbé-Azalou 1993; Arhin 1994; Monga 1995). They regularly adopted a critical tone towards the massive investments in funerals in terms of time, money and social energy, pointing to their destructive dimensions resulting in 'a bad management of death', to quote from Célestin Monga.

In southern Benin, as in other parts of Africa, and certainly along the West African coast, funerals have long received sizeable investment; the case of southern Ghana probably epitomizes this (Van der Geest 2000; Parker 2020). In southern Benin, historically, a quick burial of the corpse was followed by a whole cycle of ancestralization rituals mobilizing wide social networks and significant resources, especially in the case of important individuals (Le Hérissé 1911: 165–75; Herskovits 1938: 352–402; Rouget 1994; Noret 2010). As Herskovits, who spent a few months in Dahomey in the early 1930s, put it: '[T]he rituals which mark all phases of death are characterized by the maximum possible expenditure, among the poor as well as among the rich' (1938: 211).

The forms of this investment changed considerably throughout the colonial and postcolonial periods. For instance, the ritual means of social distinction were transformed with religious change and the growing cultural legitimacy of Christian (and Muslim) burials during the twentieth century (Noret 2010). Yet, today, funerals held

[1] Works cited in this section represent a selection of references from the last decades of engagement with funerals in African studies; a more comprehensive review, although now slightly dated, can be found in Jindra and Noret (2011).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972023000256 Published online by Cambridge University Press

under the auspices of 'world religions' are still often coupled in southern Benin with lineage rituals, although in increasingly tense coexistence (Noret 2014). An equally crucial force reshaping funerals in the last decades has been the growing (and now common) recourse to mortuaries. Since the late 1970s, and most evidently since the 1990s, mortuaries have powerfully reshaped the time structure of funerals, allowing most mourners to delay burials for weeks in order to organize grand funerals in the presence of the corpse, ideally at the weekend. Finally, a widely present neophilia, combined with the increasing monetization of the economy and the marketization of funerals, has driven the continuous dynamic of the material culture of death, leading to the emergence of a true funeral industry that now provides everything from plastic chairs and tents (air-conditioned at the most affluent funerals), printed posters, stickers and obituaries, to fabric for the funeral 'uniforms', mortuary beds and plastic flowers, and, of course, professional catering services at the funerals of the upper and middle classes.

Yet, as has also been the case for decades in Ghana (de Witte 2001: 76–80; Parker 2020: 311–23), funeral expenses are very much part of a local debate, and these 'ruinous ceremonies', as they are sometimes called, attract regular criticism from those same individuals who might end up performing them when their own time comes to mourn.

As early as 1967, during the decade of coups that witnessed ten different heads of state in Dahomey, a legal attempt was made to curb funeral expenses, officially capping them at 10,000 CFA francs, and to prohibit the serving of alcohol on these occasions. According to old people's memories, however, this law was only briefly (and unsystematically) enforced.[2] Following the return to democracy in the 1990s, reform has totally disappeared from the social and political horizon, and most Beninese have never heard of such attempts. Yet, the public conversation about the cost of funerals has continued. In July 2017, and then again in July 2020, a member of the national assembly (and a Pentecostal Christian), Nazaire Sado, suggested reviving the law capping funeral (and marriage) expenses, proposing to limit funeral expenses to half a million CFA francs (roughly €800). The proposition received some attention from the national media, and even from some international media – making it to the morning news on the BBC World Service in August 2017. It never made its way, though, to a discussion in parliament.

In the last few decades, economic investments in funerals have attracted significant attention in both the public sphere and academia, perhaps with a particular focus on the spectacular Ghanaian 'funeral industry' (de Witte 2003) and the burden of funeral costs in South Africa (Case *et al.* 2013). In Sjaak Van der Geest's words, writing about the Ghanaian situation, such lavish West African funerals are essentially performed 'for the living' and are occasions when a corpse is turned into 'a *corpus festi*, a ritual object, an indispensable "party good" for a proper celebration' (Van der Geest 2000: 123–4). Such an instrumentalist view conceives of burial ceremonies as the product of social strategies of distinction through which the living compete for social prestige and recognition of their social value. Certainly, this argument has the

[2] The same conclusion of loose or inconsistent enforcement can be drawn from Jamous's account of lineage funeral ceremonies observed in Porto-Novo in 1967–68; these obviously involved significant expense, with guests provided with drinks and food along the ritual cycle (Jamous 1994).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972023000256 Published online by Cambridge University Press

merit of reminding us that funerals are not necessarily about grieving, but also constitute moments to be apprehended in and of themselves – that is, as moments in which events and strategies also take place that have nothing to do with death.[3]

Yet, this perspective does not fully reflect the intimate intricacies of motives and affects that can unfold through funeral events. Rather, we need to account for the intersections of different reasons in the planning and experiences of funerals. In what follows, I build on the Bourdieusian understanding of the notion of 'investment' to theorize the deep intertwinement in Beninese funerals of concerns for the dead and the construction of a sense of fulfilled filial duty on the one hand, and a desire for social distinction on the other. In its broad Bourdieusian understanding, investment is meant to account for situations in which people are invested, as desiring and affected subjects more than as economic agents. Especially in his later writings, Bourdieu engaged more thoroughly with psychoanalysis to account for what he called the 'socialization of the libido' (1997; 1998), grounding even more firmly his theory of practice in the realm of feelings and affective engagements with the world (see also Fourny 2000; Aarseth 2016; Steinmetz 2014). In this light, the notion of investment should be understood here as an allocation of energy sustained by socialized desires, driven by internalized 'feelings for the game'. Investments in funerals thus both have a very literal economic dimension and are far from grounded in rational economic calculations.

Simultaneously, as has been suggested above, such investments take place in an environment where funeral expenses can be questioned openly, and mourners do not necessarily have an unproblematic, enchanted relation of taken-for-granted commitment, or 'ontological complicity', to use Bourdieu's words (1998: 77), to the social game of funerals. Economically speaking, funeral occasions certainly stand together with other equally important and economically costly social ventures, such as the pursuit of education for one's children or the building of a house, to mention just two typical projects in which people with at least minimal access to capital are often invested over several years. In other words, investments in funerals can be tinged with ambivalence as they position people between the anxiety of not being equal to the task and worry about the consequences that funeral spending might have in other social spheres, and in the pursuit of other projects.

Investing in funerals

Let me continue with a vignette. Gildas is a retired driver from a state company, in his early sixties when I met him around 2010. In May 2012, he lost the (paternal) uncle who had raised him for most of his childhood. In early June, just after the funeral had been held, he repeatedly stressed during our conversation that he had been more

[3] On Central Africa, see Tonda (2000), echoing early the insights of Balandier (1985 [1955]), on rituals ending the mourning period and the quests for status of Congolese women in Brazzaville. Also relevant is the ethnography of Vangu Ngimbi (1997) on funerals as spaces of political protest for socially marginalized young men in Kinshasa. This theme has been revisited several times since then by De Boeck (e.g. 2009) and others (e.g. Grootaers 1998; Dississa 2009), who show how funerals in Kinshasa now regularly turn into an 'intergenerational battlefield' (De Boeck 2009), a dimension to which Pype has recently added a more sustained examination of the social divisions and class boundary-making at play on these occasions (Pype 2015).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972023000256 Published online by Cambridge University Press

affected by the death of his uncle than the man's own children. Perhaps this was a rhetorical statement, but Gildas had been truly upset, and he stressed the good care his uncle had taken of him during his childhood years to explain why this loss had moved him. Money had been a key way in which his uncle had expressed this care, and Gildas remembered how, in those days, the uncle used to give him slightly more pocket money than he did to his own eldest son, since Gildas was a bit older. He ended his speech by asking rhetorically: 'Who is that man who will give you more pocket money than to his own eldest son? This [loss] is more painful to me than to his own children. This is a man I will never forget.'

The relationship Gildas had with his paternal uncle never deteriorated – at least in his retrospective account – and when the latter died, it was therefore crucial for Gildas to be able to participate honourably in a dignified and dignifying funeral. He contributed the same amount of money as the sons of the deceased for the pooled general expenses – 200,000 CFA francs (€300) – to which he added more than 30,000 CFA francs (€50) for the funeral loincloths that had been chosen for the event and more than 100,000 CFA francs to host his personal guests during the reception that followed the burial. And this was without counting the expenses that his wife had made in his name during the funerals, and that he anticipated he would have to refund her at least partially. 'We will still have to discuss that,' he said with a sour smile that evoked, in his own way, the often tense economic relationships in Beninese couples (see Falen 2011: 93–121; Lemay-Boucher and Dagnelie 2014).

After sleeping badly and being distressed between the moment of his uncle's death and the funeral, he now anticipated the following months with some anxiety, given the amount of money he had spent – certainly more than six months of his income from his retirement benefit. He was quick to acknowledge that 'we have spoiled money' on that occasion. But the rest of our conversation revolved around the impossibility of escaping such expenses, for various reasons: because it is a conventional way to honour the deceased; because having a lot of guests is prestigious and socially welcomed (despite the economic costs); and because the family reputation is at stake. Gildas went on: 'If something saddened you and hurt you, you will spend money, and it will resemble a party' – a party where it is important to exhibit an extended social capital. And indeed, when I mentioned that, on the day of the funeral, I had followed friends to another compound and not his to be served food, he asked with a smile: 'And why did you not come here?' Much more than keeping the costs of funerals as low as possible, exhibiting an economic investment in funerals to a wide range of kin, neighbours, acquaintances and friends was, in Gildas' discourse, the real motor behind funeral displays: 'If you have spent a lot, people will say that this family has performed the ceremonies well ... but if you do not spend, they will say, "They have money but they do not want to spend," or they can refer to you as "poor".'

In fact, Gildas regularly went back and forth during our conversation between comments about the loss he experienced and his grief on the one hand, and social concerns of various kinds on the other: how shall I find the necessary money to host my guests on the day of the funerals? How shall I be part of a funeral that will be considered dignifying for the deceased as well as for myself? When I conducted the interview after my participant observation of the funeral, he was both proud of the ceremony and relieved that everything had gone well and that he was able to display publicly a certain social status; but he was still nervous about the amount

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972023000256 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of money he had spent on the occasion. It would be easy to isolate sentences in his conversation that would support the idea that funerals are organized 'for the living' (Van der Geest 2000), or, in contrast, that they are organized 'for the dead' – that is, as the pure manifestation of an intent to honour the deceased. But looking at the totality of his discourse makes it quite clear that his psychic investments – in the classical psychoanalytical meaning of allocations of psychic energy – were directed at both the living and the dead.

In other words, Gildas' commitment to the funeral of his uncle arose not only from a concern to enact or perform social status in a culturally salient context, but also out of a sense of duty towards the departed, as moral conduct of honour and as an act of recognition towards a man he 'will never forget' and to whom he felt indebted. This is hardly surprising in a region where the duty of taking charge of one's parents' funerals is a critical social obligation that is inculcated in children very early. In everyday situations, people can, for instance, comment on their poverty or on their economic difficulties in that moment by saying that, having children, they have at least people who will bury them, even if they have no resources to live a decent life, or their life is subjected to economic stress. Similarly, it is in terms of debt that people regularly refer to the organization of their parents' funerals: 'It is a debt and we settle it,' as the Fongbe maxim goes.[4] Sporadically hearing this type of statement from their parents' and other adults' mouths, and witnessing the costly performances regularly on display, children come to learn the critical value of funerals. Or, to take another example, the duty to care for one's parents' burial also provides a common metaphor to thank a benevolent child: 'You have already buried me' is a conventional way to thank your (adult) child for an important gift or service that she or he provided to you – although it certainly does not free a child from effectively taking charge of the burial. Finally, the value of funeral rites is also addressed in traditional mortuary songs.[5]

These are only brief examples, but the fact is that the duty to bury one's parents is strongly inculcated in children by diverse actors involved in their socialization – first in their family circle and then among their groups of peers, when friends, classmates and colleagues are confronted with deaths in their respective families, and the issue of funerals emerges in conversations, visits of condolence are made and contributions collected. As socialization is also formative of desire – a 'socialization of the libido', in Bourdieu's phrase (e.g. Bourdieu 1997) – it is worth noting here that this cultural imperative is not learned in an emotional vacuum but in situations of significant affective engagement, and often from the parents themselves. 'Social facts' are constituted, in Durkheim's famous formula, not only from ways of thinking and of acting, but also from 'ways of feeling' (Durkheim 2007 [1895]: 4); this is perhaps never as true as when norms have been instilled in close family relationships and emotion-laden situations. Over fifteen years ago, Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (2006) invited us to pay

[4] Fongbe (lit. 'the Fon language') is the main local language in use in southern Benin. The original version of the maxim translated here is '*axɔ wɛ e nyi bo mi non su*'.

[5] In this genre, probably the most eloquent example is this Yoruba song I heard a few times in Yoruba mortuary rituals in some of Ouidah's lineages of slave descent (on domestic slavery in southern Benin, see Law 2004: 189–226; Noret 2008; Lempereur 2020): 'I have engendered [bis], but it does not make children, unless they kill a ram [bis], to sacrifice to their father' – in the local (here unpunctuated) Yoruba: '*Mon bi* [bis], *ki i s'omo, af'eni o r'agbo* [bis], *bo baba re*.'

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972023000256 Published online by Cambridge University Press

more attention to African systems of honour. In this perspective, funerals provide telling cases where social subjects, such as Gildas, strive to avoid both the public shame of being classified as 'poor' and the feeling of being an unworthy child unable to do things properly or to deliver honourable obsequies to their parents.

Ambivalent investments

Besides the complexities of mourners' discourses about their investments – both psychic or affective and economic – in funerals, Gildas' case also exemplifies the massive amount of resources many people allocate to funerals compared with their level of income. Gildas' discourse suggests that these expenses can be made out of a sense of duty towards the departed, because of an explicit desire to give the dead a befitting or dignifying burial, or because of a concern for social rank or status, out of a sense of place deriving from a certain social position – in other words, '*noblesse oblige*'. In fact, they often reflect an entanglement of the two motivations. Yet, two other dimensions of funeral expenses need to be considered to account for the social experience they constitute. These are: (1) the fact that funerals also are occasions where certain people have the opportunity to push expenses higher without actually having to pay them; and (2) the fact that these expenses are regularly made at the cost of others. These two aspects largely contribute to feed ambivalent feelings towards the price of funerals.

First, a funeral 'scenario' or programme is always the outcome of family discussions, often conducted initially among the adult children of the departed (or among the siblings, when the deceased does not have adult children). Suggestions about the date, place and religious modalities of the funeral are then renegotiated with the 'authorities' of the deceased's lineage – that is, the lineage head and his assistants – as well as with elder relatives, typically his or her siblings (see Noret 2010). These categories of people will have a say about the funeral scenario without actually having to support the costs that the choice entails: for instance, when the burial is delayed to allow for renovation work in the lineage compound where the funeral is to be held, at the pressing request of the lineage authorities. In other words, the social actors who have to bear most of the costs of the funeral – the deceased's children and children-in-law – do not master entirely the decision process, and some of the costs can often be imposed on them by other, more senior members of the lineage.

When Honoré's mother died in the middle of May 2005 in Ouidah, a town on the Beninese coast famous for its past involvement in the Atlantic slave trade, he was the eldest son of the deceased woman. He told me at first that he wished that she could be buried quickly, in order to avoid at least the costs of a prolonged stay in a mortuary. Then in his late forties, he had recently married a new young wife, and some of his children were going to secondary school. This situation already implied non-negligible everyday expenses, and he did not want to add too much to these. The director of a primary school and responsible for other public institutions in the town, Honoré was a respected man. Yet, he did not manage to impose on wider family circles his preference for burying the departed without too much expense. His mother's lineage had had no official head for many years; this complicated the decision process, because it multiplied the number of interlocutors whom the children had

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to conciliate in order to organize a funeral that would be well received by the lineage's elders. Some cousins of the deceased woman argued that she was the principal lineage priestess in charge of ceremonies for the ancestors, and that she could not be buried 'just like that' – that is, in the relatively simple way the children had first suggested, without too long a stay in the mortuary, and without engaging in repairing the lineage house where the body would be laid in state before the burial. Yet, in order to avoid a dispute with their matrilineal kin, Honoré and his siblings had to accept a more costly scenario, and prepared themselves for a delayed and more lavish burial. The dead woman was finally buried six weeks after her death, and the children and children-in-law had, without much surprise, to bear most of the expenses.

In fact, the dialectics of social pressures and internalized norms are such that, when the children (and children-in-law) of a dead person are reluctant to invest in a funeral, there will always be other people in the wider family circle who will incite them to spend more, reminding them of the importance of the event, of the place that the deceased had in their lives, and of the gossip that a modest funeral would bring about. In the case of Honoré's mother, Honoré, whom I met several times between the death and the funeral, got more and more concerned about the importance of his mother's funeral and ended up spending more than his mother's lineage elders expected: the reception he personally organized after the burial was attended by hundreds, and vast quantities of food and drink were served to all the attendees. By the end of the event, Honoré was convinced that he had done well in spending much more than he had initially planned on his mother's funeral. This is not always the case, and it is not uncommon for people to maintain a form of distance from the expenses they finally allocate for a funeral. In Gildas' words: 'We have spoiled money.' Surely, the observable gap between a lack of mastery over the decision process and the effective economic responsibility of the funeral is a phenomenon that helps us understand both the importance of funeral expenses and the critical look people can often take at them.

Second, there is, however, another decisive source of ambivalence concerning the actors' consent to spend on funerals – namely, the mourners' competing social and economic commitments. This derives from the fact that the mourners in charge of the material organization of the funerals are not only mourners; they have parallel social engagements as parents or spouses, or, for the children-in-law, as members of other extended families. These rival social commitments and competing social roles may actually give rise to significant tensions and feelings of burden when death comes knocking. It is, for instance, common to say in southern Benin that when people cry after hearing of the passing of a close relative, they shed tears for the money it will cost them rather than because of any feelings they had for the deceased. Obviously, this is a local self-caricature (and not a very generous one), since many people clearly have deep attachments to departed persons and express real feelings of grief. However, the precarious situations and economic uncertainties of many people simultaneously lead them to rapidly evaluate such situations in economic terms (also Noret 2012). Writing about similar situations in South African townships, Erik Bähre speaks of 'reluctant solidarity' to evoke the tensions arising from the simultaneous and competing demands for contributions from burial societies and the expectations of solidarity towards close kin inside one's household or family (Bähre 2007). And Harri Englund writes that 'the existential and material burden of funerals' are

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972023000256 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'particularly distressing for both moral and material reasons' in urban Malawi townships (2001: 99–100).

In 2005, when Clovis, then a young public service executive in Cotonou, was faced with the death of his father – a man whom he had sincerely admired – he and his siblings had virtually no more savings, since they had all already eaten into them during their father's long illness (see Noret 2012). Fortunately for Clovis, he was able to rapidly mobilize financial support from several friends and colleagues, and with the added money of other (limited) debts, as well as from his salary, he organized a dignified funeral for his father. However, like many successful young men of his age, he knew all too well how much these expenses, for both healthcare and funerals, impeded his other notable projects – namely, buying a plot of land and starting to build his own house on the outskirts of Cotonou, as well as saving money for the prospect of having a first child. This last issue was then becoming pressing, as he had already gone well beyond the local mean age of first paternity. This type of tension, arising from competing social commitments and desires, is more often than not a structural part of the experience of finding oneself in a position to take economic responsibility for funerals. In other words, consent to accept the expenses on such occasions can in fact position people between the anxiety of not being equal to the task and the apprehension of the consequences that the sums invested in the burial ceremonies will have on other social commitments and the pursuit of other projects.

Finally, there are situations in which concerns for filial duty seem to play a lesser role in the personal equation facing bereaved children, and even family circumstances where love and dedication to the dead seem less present, or altogether absent. I still vividly remember, for instance, an old dying woman abandoned by her children in the house of one of her cousins, in a lineage compound in Abomey, in February 2004. The old woman was refusing food and had been left to die without her close family present; she had been sleeping or groaning painfully for a few days at the time of my visit. Her cousin was afraid and didn't dare sleep in her room next door anymore. The woman's children were living in Cotonou and had dropped off their mother there, in her lineage compound, asking to be called only when the woman had died, presumably to then start planning for her funeral. The fact that the dying woman had been left at the door of a woman who was suspected by some to be a witch might indicate that she too was suspected of witchcraft, but I was never able to confirm this hypothesis.

Yet, the complexities of family divisions and relations cannot be reduced to situations haunted by the troubling presence of the occult. In fact, this type of lonely agony can also happen without any witchcraft suspicion; for example, ten years later, still in Abomey, the father of a known comedy artist died while surrounded by only a few cousins and no children, in a lineage compound of the neighbourhood where I resided. The lonely death was followed a few weeks later by a grand funeral in which his children invested massively.

Worthy children and social distinction

The cumulative facts that the social agents in charge of the majority of expenses do not fully master the decision process leading to a funeral 'scenario' and that funeral

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expenses inevitably compete with other social commitments and projects do not imply that these occasions always induce resentment and cleavage.

As Gildas' case has already revealed, social expectations and norms, at least partly internalized, also constitute powerful drives to make investments on their own. Depending on the situation, these different dimensions of external constraints and internalized drives combine or intersect, although not necessarily. Grand funerals can be organized by children who did not really care for their ageing parents, or who had bad relationships with them, and such situations certainly substantiate an expression such as 'funerals for the living'. Yet, organizing distinguished funerals and performing social distance can be integral to doing things properly, and can even echo the appetite for distinction of the departed person. These issues entwined tightly in summer 2013 in Abomey, the former capital of the famous precolonial Dahomey kingdom and now a secondary, administrative urban centre. This case, which followed the death in January 2013 of a rich landlord and businessman active in the trade in agricultural products and silviculture, also highlights the multifaceted social divisions of the local social space and the tensions that arise around what it means to organize a dignified funeral.[6]

At that time, Brigitte, the eldest daughter of the departed, was a hairdresser and shop owner in her early fifties. When her father died, people in Abomey were muttering about the recent decision of the local Catholic bishop to subvert a historical compromise with the local lineage authorities. In the preceding decades, the Catholic Church – by far the largest Christian church in southern Benin – had shown tolerance towards the juxtaposition and successive performance of Catholic services and lineage 'traditional' rites in the distinct spaces of church and lineage compound respectively. Yet, from 2011 onwards, the Catholic hierarchy decided that this form of cohabitation was no longer possible, and that Catholics should have exclusively Catholic funerals. The local king responded by promulgating a ban on the burial in lineage compounds of Catholics who would have opted for discarding 'traditional' lineage rites (Noret 2014). Brigitte and some of her siblings pleaded for an exclusively Catholic funeral ceremony for their father, arguing that he had consented to this by signing the appropriate church form. However, they were turned down by the lineage authorities, who excluded the option of an exclusively Catholic funeral, even in the deceased's own compound (which was not lineage ground), which was considered to be too close to the lineage house.

The dispute lasted for more than a month, after which the 'Catholic' camp, led by Brigitte, renounced a Catholic scenario to avoid the corpse being buried in the town's cemetery – a place with a bad reputation because of the (rare) cases of graves being pillaged to supply the black market for human bones. For Brigitte, however, avoiding an enduring conflict with lineage authorities and 'traditional' funeral specialists also became an issue, as she came to fear that the clash would end up with occult attacks targeting her because of her opposition to 'tradition'. 'I did not agree at all [with the performance of a traditional funeral] but I was forced to accept, otherwise they would have killed me [occultly] gratuitously.'

[6] A vignette inspired by this case study has already been published in Noret (2014). The material is taken in a new direction here.

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The deceased was finally buried in late February. There was, however, more than a religious conflict at play in the dispute over the appropriate ritual order. Among the deceased's children, as the printed obituary recorded, there was a customs broker, a few shop and restaurant owners, an accountant, a few hairdressers and dressmakers, a university professor and a PhD student, a teacher and a healthcare assistant. Several of them lived outside Abomey, in the economic capital Cotonou or in the north's major city, Parakou. Three resided permanently in Europe. In other words, they represented a group of siblings with levels of economic and/or cultural capital well above the average in a provincial town such as Abomey, with a significant proportion of them probably qualifying as 'middle class' or as members of a commercial petty bourgeoisie, depending on their profiles. For this group of siblings, organizing a funeral that relied solely on 'traditional' lineage rites was socially degrading to a certain extent, because of the social distance between them and the world of 'traditional' ritual specialists, who tend to recruit among poor and uneducated young men, under the supervision of elders who are illiterate or 'half-literate', to quote a local expression. In the words of Vincent, one of Brigitte's younger brothers, a small businessman selling mobile phones to locals and arts and crafts to tourists:

> As for them [my older siblings], they wanted to show to their friends that the deceased [their father] was somebody very powerful, and so that he will not be buried like a dog, with only a few individuals who will perform the ceremonies.[7]

In the last decades, a Christian burial has indeed increasingly become a significant element in the enactment of a dignifying funeral in urban circles and among those with 'middle-class' aspirations, and a source of social profit or distinction. In Vincent's phrase, lineage rituals – once the hegemonic way of death – have become synonymous with an infamous funeral, with the ceremonies performed by only a handful of 'individuals', a pejorative term in southern Benin here loaded with clear class disdain.

Therefore, faced with both the new Catholic intransigence and the equally rigid position of their lineage authorities, Brigitte and her siblings sought to avoid the relative social demotion that an exclusively traditional funeral would have represented for them by calling on the priest of the small Abomey parish of the Orthodox Church – an institution represented in Benin by only a handful of local branches. This man, a former seminarist in the Catholic Church, was approached because he continued to practise an accommodation with 'traditional' lineage mortuary rituals, as well as to receive Catholic corpses in his church – a situation that has led to an enormous increase in the number of funerals led by the Orthodox Church since 2011 (see Noret 2014).

Since it is usually possible to organize funeral liturgies at home for an additional fee to the priest, for Brigitte and her siblings, an Orthodox burial mass, organized in the deceased's compound itself, proved to be the solution to the dignifying funeral they wanted to hold for their father. Despite inauspicious beginnings, when Brigitte was arguing with her lineage authorities over the appropriate religious order

[7] Interview with Vincent, July 2013.

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of the funeral, she ended up being moderately satisfied with the compromise reached over ritual issues (although she resented having to pay the lineage ritual specialists as well). What meant the most to her, however, was that she had managed to organize a Christian service 'at home' – with the subsequent profits of social distinction – and a grandiose funeral reception immediately afterwards. A significant part of our conversations in July 2013 revolved around how much she had invested in her father's funeral, and how lavish it had been. And this was certainly the topic she was most keen to talk about. There was more, however, in her discourse than a concern for distinction.

> We spent, we spent well, because our father, he liked luxury. He liked to see people well dressed. My father, he liked that. And he was himself saying, 'When I will be dead, I want that my burial be well, well done' ... My father was saying, 'My death, it must be well [done],' and that is exactly how we organized it.[8]

Running in parallel with her concern for not being confused with the poor and illiterate strata of Abomey's population, she was indeed truly concerned with giving back to the departed, and with respecting what she considered to be his last will: 'The way our dad was doing us good, we also had to do something good for him,' as Brigitte was at pains to emphasize. Moreover, the fact that organizing a grand burial was a major mark of respect towards the departed was further developed by Brigitte through the idea that her father had actually 'paid for his funeral' himself. Brigitte considered that the invisible hand of the deceased was active behind her being able to gather, without much difficulty, the enormous amount of money necessary for the funeral; the prediction her father had made to her when he was still alive – that she would find the money – was realized when she and her siblings proved able to organize a funeral 'bigger than themselves', as Brigitte put it. It is as if funerals were inserted in a chain of gift exchanges between the mourners and the dead, and wealth had to be destructed on the occasion as part of both a performance of (class) identity and a way to honour the departed.[9]

Again, I certainly do not want to imply by this that funeral investments should be understood as pure manifestations of grief. Obviously, the wide mobilization of social networks on these occasions and the attention paid to various social relationships and social networks highlight the multiplicity of the issues at stake. Yet, concern for the departed should not be obliterated, and it regularly appears to be inextricably entwined with other motives, as funerals constitute a key moment in the construction of the sense of having fulfilled one's duty towards the dead. The point can also be

[8] Interview with Brigitte, July 2013.

[9] Paying respect to the dead in the appropriate, legitimate (historically contingent) forms can probably be considered a productive dynamic in the grieving process (see Noret 2010). A more detailed psychoanalytical version of this argument, which invites us to rethink grief through the prism of gift relations, can be found in the work of Lacanian psychoanalyst Jean Allouch (1997). In a critique of the Freudian model of grief, which postulates that, in the course of 'grief work' (*Trauerarbeit*), the ties with the lost object are progressively severed (and the lost object replaced by another), Allouch has argued that, more than the break of relations, grief supposes the sacrifice to the departed of 'a bit of oneself' ('*un bout de soi*'), a costly gift whose form is, of course, culturally specific (*ibid.*).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972023000256 Published online by Cambridge University Press

made in a negative form, since I have known a few people who, for diverse reasons, were unable to participate as they should have done in the funerals of their parents. In such instances, I have witnessed among a few people I got to know quite well how the following months, and sometimes years, found them plunged into a psychic *malaise*, because of feelings that they had not been righteous to the dead (see also Noret 2012).

Conclusion: conducts of honour

Let me start my conclusion with one last vignette. Christiane is a Beninese woman in her mid-fifties now living on the modest income of her small street shop in the periphery of Cotonou, Benin's economic capital. The daughter of a vodun priest and herself a former vodun adept, she grew up in a village approximately fifty kilometres east of Cotonou and then in the small historical town where her mother originated, Ouidah. She converted to the Celestial Church of Christ, Benin's most important prophetic 'independent' church (Mary 1999; Henry 2008), soon after migrating to Cotonou and meeting her first husband. She has now been a Pentecostal for approximately fifteen years. Her mother died during her early childhood, but her father lived until the end of the 1990s. When he eventually died, she was expected to devote considerable expenses to the funeral; in those days, as the daughter who had migrated to the economic capital and had managed to establish a small business there, she was slightly richer and the most economically successful among her siblings. As expected from a woman of her status, she hired the services of a photographer on the occasion of the funeral and received a selection of images. She was then surprised to recognize her father in one of the photographs, attending the reception following the burial, among the other guests. When I first discussed this issue with her in November 2000, her conclusion was very clear: the fact that her dead father had actually come to enjoy the food and the drinks with the rest of the guests was a sign of his benevolence towards her, and even a benediction. It showed that he approved of the way she had organized the funeral. This sign from her father was so important to her that, since then, she has kept this picture in her pillow, sewing it into the cushion on which she sleeps every night – something I only discovered some five years later. Despite her conversion to Pentecostalism fifteen years ago, a form of Christianity well known for its hostility towards any form of symbolic exchanges with the dead (Noret 2004), the situation – to my knowledge – has not changed.

Such narratives evoking the manifestation of the departed during their funeral – and often during the reception, undoubtedly the most costly moment for the mourners – are not uncommon in southern Benin. In most cases, they build on the breaking of glasses, plates or plastic chairs, which is interpreted as a sign that the departed is taking part in the funeral and taking his or her share of the feast. But people also, though less often, recount that they have seen the departed passing by among the attendees during the reception. What these narratives have in common is that these signs are always interpreted as benedictions. Obviously, such passing comments do not denote systematized 'beliefs'. Yet, they may well provide indications of the eagerness of people to scrutinize any signs of recognition that the departed could give them, and they indicate the importance that pleasing the dead can have for the mourners organizing a dignifying funeral.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972023000256 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Of course, the structural fact that some people are in a position to urge others to spend more without having to assume the economic consequences of the funeral options that they encourage (for instance, a delayed burial, implying more repairs to buildings, more media advertising, etc.), certainly constitutes a major dimension to consider in order to understand the importance of funeral expenses. It also probably helps to understand why people may often feel partly uncomfortable about their expenses for a funeral, and why funeral expenses may be tinted with ambivalence, as people regularly keep a critical distance from the expenses to which they have finally agreed. Similarly, the fact that funeral expenses inevitably compete with other social commitments and economic projects regularly feeds forms of ambivalence towards the cost of funerals.

Yet, the cases explored in this article show in some detail how funerals are events in which people invest a lot of time, energy and money, because a lot of entangled issues are at play – demonstrating a certain social standard being not the least important. Yet, for the children of a dead person in particular, a notable issue is trying to save face, not only to avoid being considered an unworthy man or woman, and also an unworthy child, but also to be able to feel at peace regarding the duties that one is expected to accomplish towards one's parents.

In these existential and social ordeals with multifarious implications, I have argued for a consideration of the deeply entwined nature of the economic and psychic or affective investments involved in these occasions. As such, instrumentalist views arguing that the lavishness of funeral expenses means that mourners take death as an 'excuse' to perform a ceremony for the symbolic benefit of the living probably underplay the tensions in which people can be caught while engaging in such expenses and the true burden funerals represent. Rather, as ambivalent and costly conducts of honour, investments in funerals feature the entangled social connections and commitments, to both the living and the dead, that constitute social subjects as they strive to live worthy lives.

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Cite this article: Noret, J. (2023). 'Burying at all costs: investing in funerals in southern Benin'. *Africa* **93**, 293–309. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972023000256