

Akan and Ewe Perspectives on Death

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Abstract

This article examines Akan and Ewe understandings of death, ancestors, and bereavement in Ghana and explores their implications for pastoral counselling. Using a qualitative pastoral review approach in the Ashanti and Volta Regions of Ghana, the study integrates relevant literature with pastoral observations derived from 40 reviewed bereavement-related cases and counselees. The findings indicate that grief in Ghana is seldom experienced as a purely private matter. Rather, it is interpreted within communal, spiritual, and ritual frameworks that shape how mourners understand burial, memory, loss, and the continuing significance of the dead. The review further suggests that bereaved persons frequently report dreams, sensed presences, unusual household occurrences, and fears that the deceased may be unsettled or restless. These experiences are not marginal to grief; they are often woven into the mourner's meaning-making process. The article argues that pastoral counselling in Ghana must be both theologically grounded and culturally literate. It concludes that a Christ-centered pastoral response should combine theological clarity, cultural sensitivity, and emotional attentiveness in order to guide mourners toward healing, peace, and hope.

Keywords Akan; Ewe; bereavement; ancestors; pastoral counselling; Ghana

1. Introduction

Death in Ghana is seldom treated as merely a biological event or a private family loss. More often, it is understood as a communal rupture with spiritual, moral, and relational significance. The death of one individual affects not only the immediate household but also the extended family, lineage, clan, church community, and broader social network. For this reason, bereavement in Ghana is rarely confined to inward sorrow. It is expressed through public rituals, communal obligations, remembered speeches, symbolic acts, and family negotiations that continue well beyond the burial itself.

Scholarship on death and dying in Ghana consistently shows that the meanings attached to death are shaped by communalism, spirituality, and culturally embedded understandings of the relationship between the living and the dead. In Akan settings, for example, the distinction between a "good death" and a "bad death" remains important and influences funeral practices, family honor, and the social interpretation of the deceased person's life (Adinkrah, 2024). Mourning is therefore not a neutral or purely emotional process. It is filtered through inherited moral categories, family expectations, and spiritual assumptions.

Within both Akan and Ewe contexts, death is not only mourned; it is also interpreted. Bereaved persons may ask whether the deceased "left well," whether the funeral rites were properly performed, whether burial obligations were adequately met, or whether unusual events after the death carry spiritual meaning. Such questions are not secondary to grief. In many cases, they form part of the grief itself. Consequently, mourners do not enter pastoral counselling as

blank slates. They bring with them a network of cultural narratives, ritual memories, religious assumptions, and emotionally charged interpretations of loss.

This article explores Akan and Ewe understandings of death, ancestors, and bereavement in Ghana and considers their implications for pastoral counselling. It pays particular attention to the kinds of experiences mourners frequently report during bereavement, including dreams, sensed presences, unusual household occurrences, and fears that the deceased may be unsettled. These experiences are examined under biblical and pastoral discernment rather than sensationalism. The article argues that an effective pastoral response in Ghana must take cultural realities seriously without sacrificing theological clarity. Its central contention is that Christ-centered pastoral counselling must combine theological faithfulness, cultural literacy, and emotional attentiveness if it is to serve grieving persons well.

2. Methodology and Ethical Considerations

This study employed a **qualitative pastoral review design**. It was conducted within the Ashanti and Volta Regions of Ghana and drew on two main sources of material: relevant scholarly literature and pastoral observations derived from **40 bereavement-related pastoral cases and counselees**. The purpose of the review was not statistical generalization but interpretive understanding. The study sought to identify recurring cultural meanings attached to death, ancestors, and mourning, as well as the pastoral implications of these meanings for counselling practice in Ghana.

The pastoral review focused especially on how bereaved persons described their experiences of grief, how they interpreted dreams and unusual events after death, and how cultural and spiritual narratives shaped their emotional responses. Particular attention was given to recurrent concerns surrounding burial adequacy, post-mortem presence, unfinished obligations, and fears that the deceased had not transitioned well.

Institutional ethical clearance was obtained from the **Professional Christian Counselling Clinic**, and informed consent was obtained from all participants whose experiences informed the pastoral observations. Strict anonymity was maintained throughout the study. Participants were identified only by alphanumeric codes such as P1 and P2, and no real or fictitious names were used in the presentation of pastoral illustrations.

Table 1. Study Design and Participant Context

Variable	Description
Study design	Qualitative pastoral review
Study setting	Ashanti Region and Volta Region, Ghana
Cultural focus	Akan and Ewe understandings of death, ancestors, and bereavement
Sample size	40 bereavement-related pastoral cases and counselees
Data sources	Relevant literature and pastoral observations

Variable	Description
Main concern	analytic Cultural meanings of grief, burial, memory, dreams, sensed presences, and fears surrounding the dead
Ethical approval	Professional Christian Counselling Clinic
Consent	Informed consent obtained from all participants
Confidentiality	Use of alphanumeric participant codes only
Study aim	To examine the implications of Akan and Ewe bereavement frameworks for pastoral counselling in Ghana

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Death, Community, and Moral Meaning in Ghana

In many Ghanaian settings, death is not interpreted as the simple disappearance of a person from earthly existence. Rather, it is understood as a transition with communal, relational, and spiritual consequences. This broad framework shapes burial customs, funeral performances, mourning periods, and expectations placed upon surviving relatives. Funeral practices in Ghana are therefore not merely about the disposal of the body. They function as acts of remembrance, public honor, social location, and ritual transition. They express what the deceased meant to the family and what the family believes it owes to the deceased.

This framework helps explain why grief in Ghana often becomes entangled with questions of moral adequacy. Families commonly worry whether proper respect was shown, whether the funeral was sufficiently honorable, and whether traditional obligations were fulfilled. Such concerns are not only ceremonial. In pastoral counselling, they may become sources of guilt, dread, and unresolved distress. A mourner may not only be grieving a death but also fearing that something essential was left undone. This moralization of grief can prolong emotional suffering and intensify spiritual anxiety.

3.2 Akan Perspectives on Death, Ancestors, and Mourning

Within Akan thought, death carries deep social and moral significance. Akan communities continue to distinguish between deaths regarded as honorable and those viewed as tragic, shameful, or spiritually troubling (Adinkrah, 2024). These distinctions affect how a death is narrated, how the deceased is remembered, and how burial rites are arranged. They also shape the social dignity accorded to the dead and the bereaved.

Research further indicates that mourning within Akan communities is gendered and socially patterned. Bereavement is not only felt; it is also publicly performed within culturally recognized roles and expectations (Adjei et al., 2024). These expectations shape how sorrow is displayed, embodied, and regulated. As a result, mourners often carry not only the pain of loss but also the pressure of communal expectation. In such settings, grief is both personal and socially managed.

Another striking feature of Akan death culture is the continuing significance of beliefs concerning ghosts, apparitions, and the post-mortem presence of the dead (Adinkrah, 2023). These beliefs remain part of everyday discourse and are not confined to remote folklore. They surface in public conversation, family narratives, and counselling encounters. A bereaved widow who reports that her late husband appeared in the room at night is not speaking from a vacuum. She is speaking from within a cultural worldview in which such categories remain intelligible.

Akan mortuary thought also attaches strong moral judgments to certain forms of death. Some deaths are perceived as socially condemned or spiritually troubling, and these perceptions may affect funeral treatment and mourning patterns (Adinkrah, 2016, 2024). Pastorally, this means that grief may be accompanied by shame, communal judgment, or concerns about dignity. The bereaved may therefore need counselling not only for sorrow but also for the moral narratives imposed upon the death.

3.3 Ewe Perspectives on Death, Life Beyond the Grave, and Ritual Continuity

Ewe perspectives, especially among Anlo and Tongu communities, likewise interpret death as transition rather than annihilation. This worldview is not merely a generalized belief in life after death but a culturally embedded understanding of life beyond the grave, in which burial and funeral rites are tied to family continuity, social integrity, and the relationship between generations (Salakpi, 2025).

Tongu Mafi mortuary thought adds further depth by framing death as a movement from one mode of existence to another, with mortuary rites carrying expiatory and punitive meanings (Ahortor, 2023). In this view, ritual failures may have consequences not only for the family but also for the deceased. This helps explain why some bereaved families experience grief alongside intense fear that the dead have not settled well or that the transition was somehow incomplete.

Dirges also occupy an important place in Ewe bereavement practice. Among the Akpini of the Volta Region, dirges function not only as expressions of sorrow but also as interpretive speech acts that announce the changed status of the deceased and comfort the bereaved (Adjandeh & Adzei, 2025). Although dirge traditions are changing under social and global pressures, they remain a powerful component of how death is narrated and emotionally processed. The mourner therefore lives not only with private sorrow but also inside a ritual language that interprets the death.

3.4 Bereavement Experiences Commonly Reported in Pastoral Counselling

Pastoral encounters with bereaved persons in Ghana often reveal experiences that are deeply shaped by Akan and Ewe cultural frameworks. Some mourners report sensing the deceased in a room after burial. Others describe recurrent dreams, unexplained sounds, footsteps in the corridor, or unusual events in the household. Some interpret these occurrences as signs that the deceased is drawing attention to unfinished matters or has not departed peacefully.

These experiences should not be treated as exotic or marginal. They are part of the lived texture of bereavement in many Ghanaian settings. What is pastorally significant is not only whether such events can be given an ordinary explanation, but how the mourner has come to interpret them. A parent who repeatedly dreams of a deceased child may not merely be recalling painful

memory. The parent may be trying to understand whether the dream is an expression of grief, a spiritual message, or a sign of unfinished relational business.

Research on bereaved parents in Ghana underscores how child loss is marked by enduring pain, intrusive memory, and ongoing efforts at meaning-making (Asare et al., 2022, 2025). This is important for pastoral counselling because it suggests that grief is not merely symptomatic. It is interpretive. Mourners seek meaning, and they often do so within spiritual and communal categories already available to them. Once grief is understood in this way, reports of visitations, unusual occurrences, and recurring dreams can be heard with empathy and discernment rather than with panic or ridicule.

Table 2. Major Themes Emerging from the Pastoral Review

Theme	Description	Pastoral significance
Grief as communal experience	Bereavement is shared across family, lineage, church, and community	Counselling must address relational and communal dimensions of grief
Burial adequacy	Mourners worry whether proper rites and obligations were fulfilled	Guilt and dread may complicate grief
Post-mortem presence	Dreams, sensed presences, visitations, and unusual events are frequently reported	Counsellors must listen carefully without endorsing fear-driven interpretations
Fear of unrest	Some mourners fear that the deceased has not settled well	Pastoral care must bring theological reassurance and careful discernment
Cultural meaning-making	Grief is interpreted through inherited ritual and spiritual narratives	Counsellors need cultural literacy to understand the mourner's framework
Need for biblical re-anchoring	Bereaved persons may become spiritually disoriented	Christ-centered counselling can redirect mourners toward hope and peace

4. Biblical and Theological Discernment

A Christian response to bereavement experiences in Ghana must be compassionate without becoming uncritical. Scripture recognizes that human beings may become frightened by what they think they have seen. In Luke 24:37-39, the disciples were terrified and thought they were seeing a spirit, yet Christ redirected them toward the reality of His risen bodily presence. The passage does not invite believers to build doctrine on fear or confusion. Instead, it demonstrates the need for discernment when grief, fear, and perception become intertwined.

At the same time, Scripture explicitly forbids attempts to consult the dead (Deut. 18:10-12). This biblical boundary is pastorally important. It does not require the counsellor to mock every reported dream or unusual event, but it does prevent the mourner from seeking guidance,

direction, or protection from the dead. Without such boundaries, bereaved persons may begin to organize family life around fear, interpret every dream as a command, or become trapped in spiritual dread.

A Christ-centered pastoral response must therefore distinguish between **acknowledging an experience** and **surrendering to its interpretation**. A mourner may indeed have had a vivid dream or a deeply unsettling emotional experience. Yet that does not mean the experience constitutes divine instruction or ancestral communication. Good pastoral care listens carefully, interprets wisely, tests spiritual assumptions, and gently re-anchors the mourner in Christian hope. Such care avoids both extremes: it neither sensationalizes grief nor dismisses it with contempt.

5. Implications for Pastoral Counselling in Ghana

Pastoral counselling in Ghana should begin with **respectful and discerning listening**. When a bereaved person reports a visitation, troubling dream, or unusual occurrence, the counsellor should ask careful and concrete questions: What happened? When did it begin? How did the mourner interpret it? What emotions followed? These questions are not signs of unbelief. They are acts of pastoral attentiveness and diagnostic wisdom.

Second, pastoral counselling should make room for **lament and storytelling**. Many mourners need to narrate not only the death itself but also the fears, dreams, signs, and unanswered questions that followed it. Suppressed grief may harden into spiritual panic. When mourners are permitted to tell the whole story, the counsellor is better able to distinguish grief from superstition, sorrow from fear, and memory from theological confusion.

Third, effective pastoral care in this area requires **cultural literacy**. A counsellor who is unfamiliar with Akan distinctions between good death and bad death, or with Ewe understandings of transition and ritual continuity, may mishear the mourner's deepest anxieties. Cultural literacy does not mean affirming every inherited belief. It means understanding the symbolic world through which grief is being expressed.

Fourth, pastoral counselling should help mourners **reinterpret fear without shaming culture**. The task is not to erase Ghanaian culture but to engage it critically and redemptively. The mourner's world should be understood, honored where appropriate, and gently brought under the clarifying light of Christ. Where cultural narratives intensify fear, pastoral care should provide theological reassurance. Where communal rituals help express sorrow and solidarity, pastoral care may affirm their relational value while still maintaining biblical boundaries.

Fifth, counsellors should remain attentive to **acute emotional and psychological distress**. Reports of visitations or messages from the dead may coexist with insomnia, despair, severe anxiety, or complicated grief. In such cases, pastoral care should be integrated with appropriate mental-health referral, family support, and continued spiritual care. Christ-centered counselling need not compete with psychological care; rather, it may work alongside it for the mourner's healing.

6. Limitations

This review is limited primarily to Akan and Ewe contexts and therefore does not claim to represent the full range of bereavement experiences across all ethnic groups in Ghana. In addition, the pastoral observations were drawn from specific regional settings within the Ashanti and Volta Regions. The study also reflects a qualitative pastoral review rather than a systematic empirical design intended for statistical generalization. Future research may build on this work by expanding the sample, including additional ethnic communities, and employing mixed-method or quantitative designs to assess the effectiveness of specific pastoral interventions in bereavement care.

7. Conclusion

Akan and Ewe perspectives on death, ancestors, and bereavement in Ghana demonstrate that grief is never merely an inward emotion. It is communal, interpretive, ritualized, and spiritually charged. Ghanaian mourners often stand at the intersection of family memory, funeral obligation, inherited belief, religious teaching, and deeply personal loss. Within that setting, dreams, sensed presences, and unusual household occurrences may become part of the mourner's meaning-making process rather than incidental experiences.

The task of pastoral counselling is therefore neither to inflame such fears nor to dismiss them with scorn. It is to listen carefully, interpret wisely, comfort truthfully, and guide the bereaved toward peace in Christ. Pastoral counselling in Ghana must be both culturally literate and theologically awake. Where culture provides language for grief, pastoral care should listen. Where fear takes hold of the mourner's imagination, pastoral care should bring clarity, reassurance, and biblical hope. In that way, Christ-centered counselling can help mourners move from dread toward healing, from confusion toward discernment, and from sorrow toward hope.

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