

The search for sustainable disposal of dead bodies: the case of Botoku, rural Ghana

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Abstract: Globally, it is widely acknowledged that we need to find more sustainable ways of disposing the dead bodies of our loved ones. Yet, there is hardly any publications in the development literature about ways in which researchers and development workers can engage and support communities towards the changes in attitudes, emotions and feelings that are required to let go of traditional religious beliefs and rituals in regard to unsustainable funeral practices. This paper uses an autoethnographic approach to narrate the story of Botoku, a rural community in south-east Ghana's ongoing search for sustainable burial practices and the associated community conflicts involved. At issue is the challenge of sustainability, how to ensure that burial practices meet the land usage needs of the present populations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs for land. The paper highlights the importance of good negotiation and mediation skills that are underpinned by a deep understanding of local context, norms and values, in an attempt to engage and support communities to change deeply engrained practices such as funerals and burials.

Keywords: community engagement, conflict mediation, population growth, sustainable burial practices, soft skills

Introduction

Modern western-world burial practices are arguably absurd, all things considered: We pack our dearly departed with synthetic preservatives and encase them in impenetrable coffins meant to defy the natural forces of decomposition that have been turning ashes to ashes and dust to dust for eons. And in the process we give over thousands of acres of land every year to new cemetery grounds from coast to coast. - Mary Lewis, Duxbury, MA [1]

Across Africa, Christian communities have accepted the traditional western burial practices as the norm, despite growing evidence that such practices are simply not sustainable. Traditional burial practices of the western world pollute our soil with concrete used for burial vaults, toxic and carcinogenic embalming fluids, copper, bronze, steel, and slow rotting hard wood [1, 2]. Over time, these materials decompose and end up in the water tables nearby. A study by Spongberg and Becks [3] of soil samples taken at coffin depth found toxic concentrations of copper, lead, zinc, and iron. While cremation is less harsh on the environment than traditional burial practices, it turns out that the process releases chemicals into the atmosphere, including carbon monoxide, fine soot, sulphur dioxide, heavy metals, and mercury emissions from dental fillings [1, 2, 4]. In addition to environmental pollution, traditional burial practices also harbor serious health risks for the funeral workers. The embalming fluid used to slow decay is primarily formaldehyde, and according to Wilson and Chiveralls[4], exposure to this chemical has been linked to a high rate of leukaemia and brain and colon cancer among embalmers. Not to mention the increasing need for land to bury our loved ones, resources that are required to create burial sites in the United States alone each year include approximately 30 million feet of hardwoods, 2,700 tons of copper and bronze, 104,272 tons of steel, and 1,636,000 tons of reinforced concrete [4]. In Australia, memorial parks and cemeteries require a significant volume of water each year to maintain lush green lawns and beautiful gardens, plus the use of chemical fertilizers, adding more toxins to the surrounding soil [4].

It is thus widely acknowledged globally that we need to make changes in the way we farewell our loved ones. Yet, there are hardly any publications in the development literature about ways in which researchers and development workers can engage and support their communities towards the change of attitude and change of heart that is required to let go of traditional religious beliefs and rituals in regard to funeral practices. This omission is unfortunate given the growing expectation that universities engage and build partnership with

industry and society in order to find sustainable solutions to societal problems. To date the literature has focused on measurable indicators of engagement such as the number of industry grants received by university researchers, industry internships by students as well as numbers of people attending public seminars and university open days. These are important, but they tell us little about the 'how', about the dynamics and messiness of the engagement process, the competencies required for effective engagement and how these might be taught to future researchers and development workers. I hope that an autoethnography or personal narrative approach, told in the first person, will throw some light on these.

This engagement case study tells the story of Botoku, a rural community in south-east Ghana's ongoing search for sustainable burial practices and the associated community conflicts involved. At issue is the challenge of sustainability, how to ensure that burial practices meet the land usage needs of the present populations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs for land [5, 6]. The paper highlights the importance of good negotiation and mediation skills that are underpinned by a deep understanding of local context, norms and values, in an attempt to change deeply engrained practices such as funerals and burials. Before proceeding to narrate the case study, it is important that I first position myself in order to provide a context for the study.

Background

I was born, and completed elementary school in my village, Botoku. Over the years, I have been involved in a range of community improvement projects in my rural Ghanaian community, such as building and improving schools, clinics and markets and providing electricity and water supply. One of the ways I continue to make my learning relevant to my village since I migrated to Australia in 1991 has been to turn my community development involvement into ongoing long-term research. Every two or three years, I return to the village for up to three months. I use the opportunity to be a participant observer in development activities; hold group discussions and interviews with informed people; analyse and integrate the findings with the relevant literature, and present summaries at development forums to chiefs and elders, churches, teachers, youth, cultural groups and so on.

In April 2012, I visited Botoku with my family to stay for a couple of months while I combined work with a family holiday. We landed in Accra, the capital city, on the Wednesday before Easter and arrived in the village on Good Friday. On Saturday there was to be a fundraising event organized by the chiefs and development leaders which would include the launch of two books I had recently published.

One of the books is based on my 30 years of involvement in development initiatives within the village and reports the experiences and effects of the development process from the point of view of the local community [7]). The other, written in collaboration with my friend and mentor 'Colonel' Asamoah, is a short history of Botoku from migration and settlement through to present-day social and cultural developments [8].

The formal launch was to be performed by the Minister of Tourism, a senior member of the ruling government, who comes from Botoku. Before the launch the chiefs and elders, along with invited politicians and other dignitaries, formally opened a new school building which the government had recently built. It was an election year, so the politicians were taking the opportunity to remind their electorates of the wonderful things they had done for them. Then everyone went to the durbar ground for the launch event. The place was full of people: school children, the *Asafos* or youth groups, church groups, music groups and the chiefs and elders in their brightly coloured clothes and paraphernalia.

The launch focused mainly on the history book. There were speeches, followed by music, dancing and an appeal for funds. The school cultural group performed a moving poetry recital in honour of Colonel and myself for our sacrifice and dedication in writing a history of their beloved village. The Minister said that the book was one of the few of its kind nation-wide and the first in the district. People from other villages and towns had already begun requesting copies to use as models for their own historical narratives. She announced that the book was priced at 10 GHC cedes (\$5) a copy, and that all proceeds would go into the Botoku Education Trust. But the Minister did not expect the invited dignitaries and people with financial means to buy this valuable book for 10 cedis at all. She considered that that would be an insult to Botoku and to the authors. So, leading by example, she paid 50 cedes (\$25) for her signed copy of the book. This was met by applause and then, with humour, she turned to key people in the crowd and like an auctioneer, called for them to follow her lead and purchase their own copies. The sales price began at 50 cedes, decreased to 45, then to 40, until it came down to the basic 10 cedes. An estimated 260 people attended the event. Seventy-four copies of the history book were sold at the event, mostly to people willing to pay more than the 10 cedi price as a way of contributing to the fundraising. For the next few weeks it was gratifying to see all sorts of people, even those who could not read or write, buying the books or sitting in small groups reading and discussing the stories and the colourful photos.

The case study

Some days after the book launch, I received a message from the chiefs and elders inviting Colonel and me to an early morning meeting, which I assumed was to formally thank us for our good work. In Botoku, all serious business must be dealt with at dawn, when the brain is supposed to be at its most fresh. Because it would be hard for 86-year-old Colonel to make an early morning walk to the chief's house, the chiefs and elders decided that we would meet at his house instead. By 5.00 am we were all sitting on the large open veranda. There were seven male and five female chiefs or their representatives, the elected district assembly representative, church leaders, and the *yokufia* or youth leader responsible for digging graves and cemetery oversight. Unexpectedly, *thetsiami* or spokesperson for the chiefs announced that they had come to see us because there was a crisis at hand and they wanted our advice.

Colonel and I were ready to listen and so the spokesperson explained the problem. About sixty years ago the village burial ground became a barrier to the natural expansion of the village. It was decided to create a new cemetery further away. The clan group that owned the land for the new site offered it to the village free of charge. The current crisis was that the original landowners had applied for an injunction at the High Court to restrict further burials at the site. They claimed that the community had exhausted the original allocation and was now encroaching on land beyond it. In Botoku, the spokesperson went on, land had always been given free of charge for public use. Just as this particular family had given land for use as a cemetery, so others had given their land for schools, roads, churches, football fields, markets and the like. The decision to take this matter to court was creating conflict in the community. Other families were threatening to demand payments for lands they had donated for public use. More urgently, there was the problem of what to do were someone to die. No one had died since the injunction was granted, but there were a number of terminally ill people in the village. In short, the chiefs and elders were asking Colonel and me to help them break the stalemate and to resolve the conflict over the burial grounds.

My first thoughts turned to my desire to rest following the book launch and spend some time relaxing with my family. I thought, 'How can I tell my children and partner that I still have work to do in the village? What do I know about cemeteries?' But then I thought 'I'm a professor of education for social sustainability, I know there is an emerging body of knowledge about ecologically friendly ways of disposing dead bodies' and I could see that there might be an worthwhile knowledge sharing and translation opportunity here for me even if it did interfere with my family holiday.

So Colonel and I agreed to help to break the stalemate, but on condition that everyone committed to respecting confidentiality until the case was finally settled. I also said that this cemetery crisis was another development challenge facing the community and just as I had researched and documented community development initiatives in the village over the past 30 years, I would carefully collect information about the steps taken towards resolving this problem. I would also like everyone at the meeting to help me so that we would all learn from the process.

I asked them to find out about cemeteries in other rural communities like Botoku and any changes occurring in recent times. I knew that Botoku was not alone in its cemetery crisis; across the world there are growing debates about how to dispose of the bodies of loved ones in dignified ways friendly to the environment. I would search the internet, talk with colleagues and friends and share whatever information I found at the next meeting. To signify the close of the meeting, Colonel went into his room and brought out a bottle of gin. As an elder himself, he said, he could not receive the chiefs and elders in his house and see them depart with dry throats.

My first task was to convince the landowners to agree to withdraw the case from court. An elder from the family who owns the land is my cousin, so it was not hard to approach him. His response was that any family decisions had to be taken collectively and he arranged a time for me to formally approach the family at a meeting. At that meeting, I explained that I had been approached to help resolve the cemetery issue. I asked them to withdraw the case from court and while they agreed that litigation was not in anybody's interests, they said that the issue involved others too and they would need to consult among their families living outside the village. They asked me to allow another week and then come back for an answer.

After about ten days, we met again. Their spokesperson explained that it was not their original intention to go to court at all; in fact, it was the last thing they wanted. However, it was more than ten years since their family had first informed the chiefs and elders that the original allocation of land was all used and that the village was encroaching on unallocated land. Successive warnings to the chiefs and elders were not taken seriously because of the attitude that in Botoku land has always been free. Furthermore, when they gave an ultimatum to the village to stop burying on land outside the boundaries of the cemetery, the chiefs and elders and indeed many other people responded with insults, name-calling and vilification rather than sitting down and dealing with the problem with respect and maturity. Given the abuse and insults they suffered, the family was determined to pursue the case. The family wanted me to know that Colonel and I were putting them in a very difficult, almost

untenable situation, because their respect for us and our general standing in the community made it hard for them to say no to us. After allowing time for them to express deep feelings of frustration and hurt about the whole conflict over the cemetery issue, I thanked them and their family sincerely for their co-operation by agreeing to withdraw the case. I told them about the two conditions that Colonel and I had agreed with the chiefs. Confidentiality about the negotiations until a final settlement was achieved and that I would document the process and present back to the community later to allow people to learn from the experience to guide the future. We thanked each other again and I left.

Next, Colonel and I met with the chiefs and elders again and gave them the response from the landowners, for which they were very grateful. I then reminded them of my request that we should all take steps back and reflect on how Botoku had disposed of their dead in the past, how they were doing it now, and whether we could learn from changes happening in similar villages or in other parts of the world. Could we find a new direction for Botoku to take with their cemeteries?

I could not stop people talking. Everybody was keen to put his or her views across and I carefully documented them all: 'Long before the arrival of Christianity, the Botoku people buried their dead; but not in coffins in cemeteries with headstones as they do today. When a person died, the clan group and community kept awake overnight with the body while information was sent to relatives and friends in the nearby villages and preparations were made for burial to occur. The overnight watch was to protect against hyenas trying to steal the corpse for a feast. For the burial, the body was wrapped in the dead person's favourite clothing and placed in a shallow grave. Each clan group had its own burial grounds. There were no memorials or tombstones. The only indications of a grave site were a few cooking pots, plates and other utensils in which food and water was left to sustain the dead person during the journey to the spirit world. For the Botoku people, while it was sad to lose a loved one, the dead were not considered separate from the living. Death was simply a passage or pathway allowing humans to enter the world of the ancestors who to this day are ever present in Ghanaian death rituals and practices'.

According to the people, 'all that had changed since the arrival of Christianity'. Community cemeteries where the dead were buried in timber coffins became a permanent feature in southern Ghana. Memorials indicating the name and the birth and death dates were erected one year after the death. At first memorials were simple wooden crosses with a concrete foundation to protect the wood from termites but over the last ten to twenty years gravestones have become an expensive feature of burials. Nobody could tell exactly how it started or where the idea came from, but it became the practice to line graves with cement blocks, presumably to prevent the walls caving in. The gravestones themselves are also made out of cement and the marble headstones are becoming ever bigger. Now, in some graves the floor and the walls are being lined with the most expensive marble tiles. Burials have become a contest of status as families, even those without the means, compete to see who can build the most imposing tombstones for their loved ones. Increasingly, people are choosing aluminium caskets rather than wooden coffins because they are seen to have higher status. Botoku, and Ghana as a whole, will need to look at the rising cost of funerals carefully because it is pushing so many families into debt. Ghanaians are behaving like ostriches with their heads in the sand; they behave as though they don't know that funeral costs are killing us. Families cannot afford to look after their children at school or send the sick to hospital, but are willing to pour money into funerals. White people invented the ambulance to take sick people to hospital in emergencies; in Ghana ambulances are mainly for carrying the dead as sign of respect and social status. Dead bodies are being kept in mortuaries for months and even years so families can prepare for funerals. Some villages and towns are now demanding that a fee be paid to the landowners as a condition for burial. In contrast, some communities have banned cement tombstones altogether, in the hope that as in the days before Christianity, burial grounds will be able to be re-used for other purposes; others are planting timber on burial grounds instead of gravestones. But if Botoku continues the way it is going', they concluded, 'where is the land coming from for our children and their children's children?'

It was then my turn to share what I had learned about cemetery practices. I wanted to put the situation in Botoku into a global context and show that it was only one tiny part of a global trend. I tried to explain that in 1850 the world's population was estimated at 1.2 billion, hundred years later in 1950, it had more than doubled to 2.5 billion and by 2050, it is expected to jump nearly 4 times to 9 billion people. I too posed the question, 'how will our children and our children's children dispose of an increasing number of dead bodies in ways that respect the loved ones, are environmentally sustainable and do not harm the increasingly limited available land, water and clean air?'

I told them that the two main forms of disposing of dead bodies were burial and cremation; that population growth and shortage of land are often the main reasons people move from burial to cremation. Although the transition to cremation can be hard for those who are used to burial, necessity often forces people to change. I spoke about the environmental limitations of both burial and cremation: burial locks up land that could be used for other purposes and contaminates the soil through the use of embalming chemicals; cremation requires

limited amounts of land but uses a lot of energy and emits carbon dioxide which contributes to atmospheric pollution. This led me to introduce two new ideas that have appeared in the last twenty years or so as ways of solving the problem of disposing of human bodies. First, the idea of 'green burials'. In many ways this is a return to the way Botoku people buried people before Christianity. Green burials do not use hard timber, metal caskets or embalming chemicals, only materials that are biodegradable and will dissolve into the soil over time. People will be able to re-use burial grounds later for other purposes, including growing food crops. With the other method (alkaline hydrolysis) the body is placed in a solution of lye and water and within a short time simply dissolves into liquid, along with most of the bones. Any remaining bones are crushed into ash and together with the liquid can be used as fertiliser or harmlessly flushed away. I said that these ways, especially dissolving the bodies in chemicals, are so new that it will take time for people to accept them, but that necessity will eventually lead to changes like this.

There were long discussions about the similarities and differences between Ghana and other places. For example, in India cremation is the norm, but among the Botoku and central Ewe-speaking people, only witches were traditionally cremated; however, some Ghanaians are starting to choose cremation for religious and environmental reasons. From that point things moved quickly. I prepared the relevant letters for withdrawing the court case, which were duly signed by representatives of the two parties and myself. All three of us made the 40-minute journey to the high court where, with the court's approval, the case was withdrawn. I was given four weeks to report the final settlement back to the court. A week after the case was formally withdrawn from the court, Colonel and I succeeded in bringing the two parties together with a view to arbitrating a settlement to the dispute.

As usual, we met in the early morning on Colonel's veranda. The atmosphere was very tense as it was the first time some of the warring parties were face-to-face to discuss an issue that had sharply divided the village. Formal greetings were exchanged and I opened the meeting with a summary of our involvement in the case to date. I went over how the chiefs and elders had approached us, the two conditions upon which we agreed to be involved, my approaches to the landowners and how grateful we were for the respect they showed us by agreeing to withdraw the case. Next, I spoke about the work the chiefs and elders had done to remember and reflect on Botoku's approaches to disposing of dead bodies in pre-colonial days, the changes brought by colonialism and Christianity and where Botoku is now. I then discussed the lessons that we could all learn not only from Botoku's history but from others in Ghana and across the world: the fact that population growth is bound to put even more pressure on our resources in the years to come and that Botoku needs to choose new directions to go into the future.

Then the two parties took turns to put their perspectives across. The chiefs and elders reiterated some of the key points I had made, while the landowners expressed frustration about the fact that lack of respect and prompt action on the part of the chiefs was largely to blame for the dispute in the first place. As Botoku custom requires, it was then time to go and consult *abrewa* (a mystical old lady renowned for her wisdom) for advice. A representative from each of the two parties, together with Colonel and me, met with *abrewa* in a private location behind the house. After about 45 minutes, the delegation returned, the arbitration reconvened and I announced *abrewa's* decisions. By custom, anything that is said during deliberations with *abrewa* must never be divulged, so I spoke only about the key outcomes.

First, *abrewa* wanted all Botoku to be grateful to the landowners for their generosity in allowing the village to use their land free of charge for over sixty years. *Abrewa* wanted to point out to the whole of Botoku that *ewuke to le amengoyawoduo*, which translated literally means that the style of dance which is fashionable at a stage in a person's life is what the person needs to dance. This statement conveys that as the world changes, so people need to change in response.

Abrewa said that for twelve months from the date of settlement (7 May 2012) the landowners should continue to allow the village to bury in empty spaces within, but not outside, the boundaries of the original cemetery. In the meantime, the chiefs and elders should commence negotiations with the current landowners or others with the aim of securing land for a new cemetery.

Abrewa was unhappy with the direction in which Botoku people are going with cemeteries. *Abrewa* wanted to remind the negotiating parties that even the land on which they had gathered that day was once the burial ground for the Botoku Lobo clan group. *Abrewa* asked the chiefs and elders to show leadership by convincing their people to seriously re-think their burial practices. *Abrewa* reminded the people that Botoku needs to think about its children's children, so that as its ancestors did once upon a time, the people bury their loved ones in simple ways so that future generations can re-use the land. Banning aluminium caskets and concrete gravestones would be the first steps in that direction.

Abrewa wanted the entire village to know that any new plots acquired for a cemetery will necessarily require some amount of payment per burial. While every effort should be made to ensure that this does not become a burden to families, it was important to prepare the community beforehand.

Abrewa wanted to remind everybody that opportunity often comes unexpectedly from adversity. Botoku, despite its rural isolation, has always been at the forefront of innovation and change in the district. What *abrewa* wanted everybody to take away from the arbitration was reassurance and confidence in the Botoku peoples' determination and capacity to overcome conflicts and divisions, their pioneering roles in being among the first in the district to adopt cocoa farming in the 1920s and their achievements in education, which have always been the envy of nearby villages and towns. *Abrewa* was convinced that whatever steps the community took to resolve the cemetery dispute would be only the beginning of a bigger change that would have implications for other villages in Ghana and beyond. The people should be proud of themselves for achieving a peaceful resolution of their dispute. It was then my turn to provide the bottle of gin that was shared to signify the close of the meeting.

It was now the responsibility of the chiefs and elders to work with potential landowners and the broader community to put *abrewa's* directives into practice. I later took photos of the typical gravestones before the settlement of the dispute, so I can compare them with subsequent graves and memorials over time. At the time of writing this paper in January 2018, the community continues to bury the dead in the same cemetery with the consent of the landowners but for an agreed fee of 20 GH cedes per burial and an additional 50 for those who wish to erect concrete gravestones as deterrent. Some of the landowners I spoke with were still unhappy about the use of concrete tombstones by families willing to afford the extra levy but acknowledge that change is slow and it is better to work with people so they can realise the need for change themselves, rather than impose change from above. It is my intention to use community versions of the present paper printed in the local language to engage the relevant groups as part of the ongoing dialogue towards the search for more sustainable funeral practices.

Discussion and conclusion

In dealing with the seemingly inevitable trend of changing mortuary practices around the globe, researchers and development workers must create an environment of open communication. Changing the way we farewell our loved ones, is a complex matter that deals with religious beliefs and traditions, environmental and economic concerns, and health and wellbeing issues. As such, akin to a wicked problem that has no easy solutions, this subject requires engagement that focusses on creating collaborative spaces where deep learning can occur [9]. Deep learning is an adaptive, participatory, and transdisciplinary process of collective learning and exploration, that promotes collaborative behavior, conflict management, and trust among stakeholders. In participating in the communication and negotiation of changing deeply engrained practices such as funerals and burials, it is of high importance to bring good negotiation and mediation skills to the table, that are underpinned by a deep understanding of local context, cultural norms and values [10, 11].

The case study supports key findings from Olagunju's [12] extensive survey of approaches to conflict mediation across African societies. First, conflict is widely perceived as the motor and engine of relationships, and relationships are regarded as the essence of life. Hence, conflict is not necessarily evil or bad, but the mismanagement of conflict can be disparaging. Second, compared with ancient Chinese or contemporary Japanese practices, African conflict resolution seems to follow the same fundamental principle of focussing on communal peace in managing all conflicts including interpersonal conflicts. Rather than heavily focussing on individual/s, the ultimate aim of settlement is always to encourage social equilibrium. Therefore, conflict resolution is first and foremost the 'healing of a communal wound and the restoration of social order and harmony' [12]. This in turn has the power to heal broken emotions and also to end cycles of violence. Third, to ensure effective resolution of conflict, forums are traditionally held in confidential surroundings. Forum leaders who are assigned with the task of resolving conflict usually are known to have integrity and the intellectual ability to perform the task. They are trustworthy and well versed with communal laws and customs. Additionally, they usually have a reputation of being experienced mediators who can handle conflict skilfully. Fourth, women are seen as wise and respected peace messengers. Irrespective of social position, efforts are made to treat everyone with dignity and as much as possible to achieve a win-win outcomes for all. Finally, conflict is seen as a dynamic process. As more cultures interact with other cultures, their subset of resolution approaches will inevitably change to adapt to new ways of co-existing [12].

In conclusion, like communities all over the world, African communities such as Botoku are going to be faced with more and more wicked problems rather than fewer. Whether it is how best to dispose of dead bodies in dignified but ecologically friendly ways, tackle violence and abuse including armed conflicts, deal with social inequalities, address our beliefs and attitudes towards same sex relationships, or tackle climate change adaption and mitigation, effective researchers and development workers will need to have very sophisticated

mediation and negotiation skills [10, 11]. Engaging communities is about creating relatively safe spaces based on respect and trust for difficult conversations to occur; it requires capacity to understand and help people to deal with their own emotions and feelings. To my knowledge, this is something that is rarely taught in research methods courses. Universities need to embrace the teaching of these 'soft' skills and capacities more seriously in the context of engaging communities towards sustainable development [13].

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