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Regula Tschumi *Buried in Style* *Artistic Coffins and Funerary Culture in Ghana*

Texts by Regula Tschumi

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Teapot, chicken, american shoe: Ghana's extraordinary coffin shapes and farewell culture

Celebrate death as we celebrate life: This is the credo of the funeral culture of the Ghanaian ethnic group Ga-Adangme, where creative coffins in the shape of animals, vehicles, etc. are used to represent the preferences or dreams of the deceased. In addition, perfectly choreographed dances transform funerals into colorful and energetic celebrations.

For more than twenty years, Regula Tschumi, who holds a doctorate in ethnology, has researched and photographed the Ghanaian funeral cult. Her astonishing, vibrantly colorful images depict Christian and traditional funeral ceremonies, bizarre installations, and various forms of laying out the deceased, as well as spectacular trends in figural coffin design over the past two decades. Tschumi also accompanied and photographed the undertaker and pallbearer Benjamin Aidoo (known as "Ghana's Coffin Dancer"), who has become world-famous through social media.

In southern Ghana, particular attention is paid to burials, especially among the Ga. For this ethnic group, funerals are among the most significant social and spiritual rites of passage. The ceremonies, often spanning several days, are grand public events designed not only to honor the dead but also to uphold a family's reputation and secure the goodwill of future ancestors. Families aim to impress and entertain guests—lavish laying-out rooms, unique coffins, and dramatic presentations all play a role. This cultural emphasis on spectacle has driven innovation in coffin design, performance, and funeral décor, making the Ghanaian funeral a unique blend of ritual, artistry, and community pride. The international art world first took note of Ghana's figurative coffins at the 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Since then, these sculptural coffins—originally crafted by Ga artists Ataa Oko Addo and Kane Kwei—have

evolved into a dynamic art form, embraced across Ghana and admired worldwide. *Buried in Style* not only showcases Regula Tschumi's vivid documentation of these unique funerary practices but also traces their transformation across generations, including the work of celebrated artist Paa Joe and his apprentices.

Regula Tschumi is an ethnologist and photographer living between Switzerland and Ghana. Working as a freelance cultural mediator in the art and museum sector, she focuses on contemporary art from Africa, African religions and associated forms of artistic expression. She completed her doctorate at the University of Basel in 2012 with a thesis on the figurative palanquins and coffins of the Ga in Ghana, and has since contributed to numerous exhibition projects, including at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, the Musée d'Ethnographie in Neuchâtel and the Kunsthalle Hamburg. Tschumi is the author of several articles in art catalogues and specialist journals, as well as two books published in 2014 based on her research in Ghana. Her monograph on the Ghanaian artist Ataa Oko Addo was published in 2019, followed by French and English editions in 2022. Photography plays a central role in her ethnographic work. Since 2006, her documentary images of figurative coffins and burial rituals have been presented in international exhibitions—including the Museum for Sepulchral Culture in Kassel—and featured in books, magazines and newspapers. In 2024, she presented a selection of her work in the exhibition *This Is the End* at the Italian photography festival Cortona On The Move. Her photographs also serve as a tool in illustrated lectures, which she delivers in English, French and German.

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Press images



01_ A driver is buried in a coffin in the shape of his Bedford truck.
Central Region, 2015. (Coffin: Kudjoe Affutu) © Regula Tschumi



02_ The eldest member of the family, a fishmonger, is honoured by her relatives with a fish coffin. Nana Otafritsa takes care of the laying out and decoration of her room the evening before. On Saturday, he and his Coffin Dancers dance with the coffin to his own music before carrying it to the cemetery. Because the fish is too long for the prepared grave, the tail fin has to be sawn off.
Greater Accra, 2024. (Coffin: Eric Kpakpo) © Regula Tschumi



03_ The family presents this fisherman and traditional priest with a coffin that corresponds to the blue teapot he used for his ritual ablutions.
Central Region, 2009. (Coffin: Kudjoe Affutu) © Regula Tschumi



04_ At the funeral of the head of their family, who worked as a Bedford truck driver, the family surprises their guests with a Bedford coffin and a performance by the Coffin Dancers. They not only dance with the truck, but also carry it to the cemetery, accompanied by a brass band.
Greater Accra, 2017. (Coffin: Douglas Tagoe, former apprentice of Kudjoe Affutu) © Regula Tschumi



05_ The Coffin Dancers in the uniform 'Scottish Red'.
Greater Accra, 2022. © Regula Tschumi



06_ Relatives at the funeral service of their mother and grandmother, who is laid out in a tent next to her coffin.
Central Region, 2018. (Undertaker unknown; coffin: Kudjoe Affutu) © Regula Tschumi



07_ A professional builder known as 'Crab' is buried in this coffin.
Central Region, 2024. (Coffin: Kwaku Hanson) © Regula Tschumi



08_ Relatives bid farewell to a fisherman in his coffin.
Greater Accra, 2024. (Undertaker unknown; coffin: Eric Kpakpo)
© Regula Tschumi



09_ The family of the chief of the fishermen honours him with a whale shark.
This is considered to be the largest and strongest of the sharks, so such a coffin
also symbolizes the high status of the deceased.
Greater Accra, 2024. (Coffin: Tawiah) © Regula Tschumi



10_ Among the employees of the Ghana Railway Company it is customary to
honour a deceased colleague with a coffin in the shape and colour of a Ghana
Railway locomotive.
Central Region, 2023. (Coffin: Daniel Mensah) © Regula Tschumi



11_ Kudjoe Affutu, Parrot, 2013
© Regula Tschumi



12_ Relatives carry the coffin of a pineapple seller to her grave.
Greater Accra, 2019. (Coffin: Eric Kpakpo) © Regula Tschumi