



THE DIALECTICS OF GRIEVING AND COPING WITH DEATH IN SHADRACH A. AMBANASOM'S *HOMAGE AND COURTSHIP: ROMANTIC STIRRINGS OF A YOUNG MAN*

Gilda N. Forbang-Looh*

Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Bamenda

Abstract

Death and the process of grieving remain universal human experiences that have continuously inspired literary reflection and creative expression. In African literature, these themes are often explored through a communal lens, where death transcends the individual to encompass family, culture, and identity. Shadrach A. Ambanasom's *Homage and Courtship: Romantic Stirrings of a Young Man* provides a compelling exploration of how individuals and societies confront loss while navigating the tensions between tradition and modernity. Through its depiction of emotional struggle, remembrance, and renewal, the text captures the dialectics of grief how mourning coexists with the impulse to heal and to rediscover meaning in life. This paper explores the inevitability of death and its attendant indelible psychological marks as well as the coping strategies adopted by the bereaved in Shadrach A. Ambanasom's *Homage and Courtship*. Though death as a universal theme is much discussed in literature, African, Cameroonian and especially Cameroonian writers of English Expression have largely focused on the "big" issues of the day like marginalization and corruption, relegating this all-time phenomenon to the background. Thus, a poet like Ambansom stands out in bringing to light death and grieving as some of the major concerns in his poetry; death not as an outcome of bad socio-political systems as the case is in most of the literature but as a psycho-social issue that we live with and must come to terms with it. Considering the psychological responses of the affected, the use of the psycho-social theory with particular attention to anxiety, fear and dreams is used for analysis. It is realized that although thoughts of death may cause anxiety, despair and sadness, its inevitability warrants that one prepares for death: minding the legacies which not only compel one to live purposefully, but also help to lighten the grieving for the bereaved, who may also be consoled through healing dreams and seeking solace in God.

Keywords:

Bereavement, coping, death, dreams, grieving, legacies, mourning.



* Corresponding Email: gildanic2005@yahoo.fr



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Résumé

La mort et le deuil demeurent des expériences humaines universelles qui ont constamment inspiré la réflexion littéraire et l'expression créative. Dans la littérature africaine, ces thèmes sont souvent explorés à travers une perspective communautaire, où la mort transcende l'individu pour englober la famille, la culture et l'identité. Hommage et séduction : Émois romantiques d'un jeune homme de Shadrach A. Ambanasom propose une exploration captivante de la manière dont les individus et les sociétés affrontent la perte tout en naviguant entre tradition et modernité. Par sa description des luttes émotionnelles, du souvenir et du renouveau, le texte saisit la dialectique du deuil : comment le deuil coexiste avec le désir de guérir et de retrouver un sens à la vie. Cet article explore l'inévitabilité de la mort et ses empreintes psychologiques indélébiles, ainsi que les stratégies d'adaptation adoptées par les personnes en deuil dans « Hommage et Courtship » de Shadrach A. Ambanasom. Bien que la mort soit un thème universel largement abordé en littérature, les auteurs africains, camerounais et, plus particulièrement, camerounais d'expression anglaise se sont largement concentrés sur les grands enjeux de l'époque, tels que la marginalisation et la corruption, reléguant ce phénomène omniprésent au second plan. Ainsi, un poète comme Ambansom se distingue en mettant en lumière la mort et le deuil comme des préoccupations majeures dans sa poésie ; la mort n'est pas considérée comme la conséquence de systèmes sociopolitiques défaillants, comme c'est le cas dans la plupart des écrits, mais comme un problème psychosocial auquel nous sommes confrontés et que nous devons affronter. Prenant en compte les réactions psychologiques des personnes touchées, l'analyse repose sur la théorie psychosociale, avec une attention particulière portée à l'anxiété, à la peur et aux rêves. On comprend que, même si la mort peut être source d'anxiété, de désespoir et de tristesse, son caractère inévitable justifie de s'y préparer : prendre conscience des héritages qui non seulement nous poussent à vivre avec détermination, mais contribuent aussi à alléger le deuil des personnes endeuillées, qui peuvent également être consolés par des rêves apaisants et la recherche du réconfort en Dieu.

Mots-clés : deuil, adaptation, mort, rêves, deuil, héritages, deuil

Introduction

Death, as one of the most profound human experiences, has long been a central preoccupation of literature, serving as a mirror through which societies interrogate the meaning of life, loss, and resilience. In African literature, death and mourning are not merely private experiences but deeply communal events that engage social, spiritual, and cultural dimensions. Shadrach A. Ambanasom's *Hommage and Courtship: Romantic Stirrings of a Young Man* delves into this intricate terrain by portraying the emotional and psychological complexities of grief alongside the human instinct to heal and move forward.

The dialectics of grieving and coping in Ambanasom's narrative illuminate the tension between despair and hope, loss and renewal, memory and forgetting. Through vivid characterization, symbolic imagery, and cultural reflection, the novel captures how individuals and communities negotiate the pain of death while reconstructing meaning and

identity in its aftermath. This study, therefore, seeks to explore how Ambanasom's work portrays the interwoven processes of mourning and coping, situating them within broader African philosophical perspectives on death, continuity, and the affirmation of life.

Shadrach Ambanasom is a key figure in Cameroonian Literature of English expression. He is renowned not only for his critical works in this literature but also for his creative works. Among his creative works, his novel, *Son of the Native Soil* seems to have garnered quite some critical attention while others especially his poetry are yet to do so, including *Homage and Courtship* which is the focus of this study. In "Ambanasom's *Son of the Native Soil* and the Concept of a Tragic Hero," Denis Fonge Tembong sets out to demonstrate that the ideas of a tragic hero as exhibited in *Macbeth* are very similar to those of the hero in *Son of the Native Soil*. To him, though the two literatures, that is, British and African are different due to cultural specificities, we can find common ground at the handling of the tragic hero.

Evangeline Agwa Fomukong Seino on her part focuses on "Ideological Representation of Unity and Peace through Contrast: A Critical Stylistic Analysis of Ambansom's *Son of the Native Soil*" wherein she dwells on how Ambanasom represents unity and the discursive choices he uses to bring out his ideology of the Ngie people. According to her, he does this mainly through the use of contrast of rhetorical questions, comparison discourses, premodifiers and proverbs. Eric Ngea Ntam focuses on yet another dimension of this text. In "Hegemony and the Paradoxical Subversion of Patriarchy in Shadrach A. Ambanasom's *Son of the Native Soil*" he sees that the suppression of the female folk triggers emancipatory tendencies which are paradoxically rendered unattainable by the same group glamouring for it. The above reviews among others bear testimony to the fact that quite some work is evident on Ambansom's *Son of the Native Soil*. However, there is very insignificant material on *Homage and Courtship* and that gives reason for studies to be carried out on it. As one of those pioneer works, this paper will focus on it from the perspective of death.

Death is not a new theme in literature. However, its universality and timelessness in literature justifies its continuous pride of place in academic discourses. It can be considered one of the most universal human concerns because it relates to all human beings though it is sometimes considered as a taboo subject because of the fear of it. Stephen Asatsa in "Death Attitudes as Predictors of Death Preparedness across Lifespan among Non-Clinical Populations in Nairobi County" argues that the treatment of death as a taboo subject has been evident among scholars and researchers as for a long time, they have focused very minimally on it. He further mentions that even from about 1959 when researchers started delving much into it, African researchers still seem to be lagging behind. Quoting Wittowski et al, he says "the major journals on death in the last 20 years have been published on North America, Europe and Australia. Majority of studies that inform current literature have been conducted outside Africa" (288). This gives us a rationale for the present research.

Death reminds us about our own very existence. Though people may be prepared to die or lose loved ones, death generally makes people sad. Mary-Frances O'Connor in "Grief: A Brief History of Research on How Body, Mind, and Brain Adapt" posits that: "The death of a loved one has been recognized as the greatest life stressor that we face as humans, heading the list of stressful life events..." (731). It is because of its universalism as well as the different emotions, attitudes and reactions to death that writers from all times and places have written about it. Poets like Emily Dickinson in "If I should Die," Edgar Allan Poe in "Annabel Lee," WB Yeats in "He Wishes His Beloved Were Dead" write about death.

William Cullen Bryant, the American romantic poet, for instance in his "Thanatopsis," instructs on how to live and die, where death is seen as a natural part of life and should not be frightening and lonely but should be welcoming and peaceful. Alfred Lord Tennyson similarly in "Crossing the Bar" presents life as an extended metaphor of a river which flows endlessly into the boundless deep of the sea and the speaker as a sailor who passes the sandbar that separates the familiarity of the harbour from the unknown realm of the open sea. Then many of William Shakespeare's works like his plays treat the theme of death in diverse ways. For instance, in the poem, "No Longer Mourn for Me" he imagines his own death and the effect on a loved one and advises they forget about him when he is no more. There are also his plays like *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* just to name these that handle the theme of death from various dimensions. So, while some authors may write about their impending death, others may discuss bereavement. Some may use it as a literary device while others suggest to us how we can cope with death amongst many other issues. Antje Ravic Strubel in "We tell Ourselves Stories" posits that "since the beginnings of what we call literature, death has proven to be its most successful producer" (3). Similarly, Lawrence Kimmel, for instance, writes on "Death as Metaphor" and he notes that death has been extensively dealt with in writing. He asserts:

What remains to be said about the question and problem of death that has not been repeated a thousand times in the history of human thought and culture? Philosophers in the Western tradition have seemingly argued every nuance of the name, nature, and consequences of death since Plato first took up the death of Socrates as the funding occasion of his philosophical life and thinking. (1)

It is seen that Kimmel generalises about the consequences of death in his first postulation but quickly narrows it to the Western tradition. It appears this is the tradition that he is familiar with and not with the African or Cameroonian literature in English where death is rarely philosophised. This is not surprising because colonialism brought in the written tradition and the issues surrounding colonialism and its aftermath have been the focus of many African writers. Some writers though, like Kofi Awoonor in "Songs of Sorrow" and "The Journey Beyond", Wole Soyinka in *Death and the King's Horseman*, Ngugi wa Thiongo and Micere Githae Mugo in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, Sammy Gaskin in *To the*

Gallows, J P Clark in *Song of a Goat*, just to name these have written about death. Writing about death, therefore, has not totally escaped the attention of African writers and Cameroon writers of English expression, specifically. However, many Cameroonian writers of English expression have minimally focused on death in their literature as they most of the time pay more attention to “serious” political, colonial and post-colonial predicaments that have largely affected the lives of the former colonised people and colonised entities in several ways. A contemplative focus on death as a psychological and predominant issue in literature seems to have escaped the attention of most writers. This is not to say death is not a theme in their literature, but it is often considered an outcome of poor political systems or gender mishaps. It seems there are so many problems ranging from corruption, embezzlement, neo-colonialism, marginalisation and similar issues which appear to catch the attention of writers more than anything else. Ambanasom puts these together under politics and to him, this should not only be the subject matter to appear relevant in Anglophone Cameroon literature. For those who think that politics is the only area where writers can demonstrate commitment, Ambanasom in the ‘Preface’ to the poetry collection, *Homage and Courtship* writes:

May those capable of pursuing more vigorous committed writing do; may our radical visionaries bloom. But let there be room for liberal humanists too. The Anglophone story can be told in many ways. To prescribe only politics and proscribe any other subject matter would be to kill our creative spirit, to stultify our imaginative efforts and to truncate our literature. (11)

However, Oscar Labang in “Against the Current: A Review of Shadrach Ambanasom’s *Homage and Courtship*” has denounced Ambanasom for always trying to justify issues about his work. To him, though Ambanasom is a powerful and celebrated critic, his tendency of inviting critics to the dialogue table to inform them that he is aware of where the weaknesses of his work are and is ready to accommodate the criticism is not right. Labang states: “in the preface to *Homage and Courtship*, he comes out apologetically to give reason for his choice of subject matter and his consciousness of the criticism that is likely to follow” (para.2). It seems that Ambanasom is justifying his going against the normal current which is not supposed to a “crime.”

From the above, the issue arises as to whether committed literature must be political and what political means by the way. Deaths, like love are political themes, though not frequently handled by many Anglophone writers. It is in this light that his poems in *Homage and Courtship* deal principally with death and love. However, the focus of this paper is on death. Shadrach Ambanasom’s view of death in *Homage and Courtship* is dominantly reflective and borders on psychological responses of the affected especially regarding coping strategies. In this connection, the psycho-social theory with particular attention to anxiety, fear, dreams, and psychological theories on death will be relevant in conducting this study. Consequently, the following poems are considered in the analysis: “Icon and

Beacon", "The Talented Three", "Ebang Iroko" "On Losing my Hair" "Healing Dreams" and "A Grain of Corn." The psycho-social theory with particular attention to anxiety, fear, dreams, and psychological theories on death will be used for the analysis. The theories on death especially as developed by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her book *On Death and Dying* will also be useful in the analysis.

Accepting the Inevitability of Death

Though death is inevitable, there is generally much fear and anxiety associated with it. Laura et al posit that "Death, as a phenomenon that escapes our control, produces great concern in most people, along with fear and anxiety" (209). The concern, fear and anxiety, generally have to do with the death of one's loved one as well as oneself. Though death is generally despised, people have different ways of coping with it, whether it is one's own death or the death of a significant other in one's life. Thus, different people will have different ways of coping with death. For instance, in the Euro-American culture, while children are not exposed to death because it is considered that they are not mature enough to cope with it, the situation in Mexico is different. Paz asserts that: "The word "death" is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London, because it burns the lips... The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love" (57). Rosengren et al corroborate this view by looking at how children are made to know and accept death when they affirm that in Mexico,

A key aspect of this view of death is that children are not only an integral part of annual death rituals, but also encounter symbolic images of death on an almost daily basis. These attitudes and practices stand in stark contrast with those in the European-American culture where parents often attempt to shield their children from death, believing that young children are cognitively and emotionally incapable of coping with death. (07)

Thus, while it may be easier for Mexicans and their children to cope with death, it may be more difficult for Euro-Americans and their children when faced with it because they seem not to accept to deal with it more openly. Therefore, different societies sometimes deal with death differently. Cameroonians, for instance most of the time, think they have to leave a legacy as seen in Ambanasom's *Homage and Courtship*.

Human beings have the privilege to know about death so well and can therefore prepare for it. In line with this, Kimmel avers that "Man is a creature that knows he is going to die. It is the fact of human existence that arguably accounts for the depth of human consciousness and the scope of human culture" (5). The denial of death is therefore, a major characteristic of human beings, especially if one is not prepared to ever die. Kubler Ross, quoted by Papalia et al posit that facing death in a meaningful way will depend on if one lives a meaningful life or not. In their view:

It is the denial of death that is partially responsible for (people's) living empty, purposeless lives; for when you live as if you will live forever, it becomes too easy to postpone the things that you know that you must do. In contrast, when you fully understand that each day you awaken could be the last you have, you take the time that day to grow, to become more of who you really are, to reach out to other human beings. (E13)

Ross' views seem to connect with Nelson Mandela's who once opined that, "death is something inevitable. When a man has done what he considers to be his duty to his people and his country, he can rest in peace" (Scouts: Creating a Better World). In essence, Papalia et al like Mandella and Ambanasom are talking about living a responsible life of fulfillment, life to the full so that the anxiety with which death comes can be reduced.

In some of Ambansom's poems, the inevitability of death is addressed where he presents the transition from life to death as the natural pattern of life. However, it causes much anxiety in many people. Conning, Naidoo and Bahgwan in "The Preparedness of Emergency Care Providers to deal with Death, Dying and Bereavement in the Pre-hospital Setting in Dubai" state that "the inevitability of death creates some degree of anxiety in individuals at some stage in their lives. The anxiety may be borne out of the fear of pain and suffering, the loss of self, the welfare of surviving family members, annihilation or simply the unknown" (2). The worrying about death, for instance, is captioned in Ambanasom's "On Losing My Hair" as seen in the following lines:

*In vain pages of journals
have I turned over and over
bootless some scientific annals
perused with anxiety and anger
in an attempt to discover
the treatment for balding head (49)*

The vigorous search for authentic, valid and reliable sources to stop the advancement of age is seen in the kinds of documents: "journals" and "scientific annals" where the persona carries out research. Balding head is a symbol of ageing, and the persona is, therefore, searching for a tested "treatment" in an attempt to stop the ageing process and consequently death. This worry and anxiety over aging is of no use because it must eventually come as he continues by telling the reader how futile his attempts have been:

*Fruitless my efforts with doctors
(personal contact or letters)
to halt the insidious invaders
of my receding forehead (49)*

From the balding head metaphor, the persona expresses fear for the inevitability of death. This reiteration is also seen in "Icon and Beacon" as well as "Ebang Iroko" where death is presented as a force that "...levels us all" (29, 33 respectively). Since death keeps everybody at the same level, the poet reminds the readers that everyone needs to wait for their turn and not worry so much about but rather use every death as an opportunity to prepare to die for death will eventually come.

In "Ebang Iroko," he puts it as such: "But sooner or later, willy-nilly/dear brothers and sisters/it will be our turn/to answer our final call" (33). Similarly, in "Icon and Beacon," the persona thinks it is important to look at death as everybody's call. "Ask not, therefore, for whom the bell tolls./ It tolls not for him alone/ it tolls for you/ it tolls for me/ it tolls for all of us/ the tragic fate of humanity" (29). Ambansom, thus, presents death that is reflective of man's smallness because its occurrence obliges the latter to ponder over his own end – an end which is not only ultimate, but more disturbingly unpredictable. A corpse is therefore a mirror that reflects into the speaker's psyche, making him internalise a sad reality which he would otherwise not like to meditate on. The bereaved speakers are chagrined both by the loss of loved ones and by the realisation of their powerlessness in the face of death.

The presentation of the death in the poems shows how mighty and influential the dead have been in society. In "Ebang Iroko," for instance, we see the serious effect the death of M.A. Asanek is evident on the living. The poet-persona regrets: "Our brilliant icon and beacon/ our candle is out/ like sheep without shepherd/ we grope about in the dark/ for a glory has vanished/ from the face of our earth" (32). The description - metaphor and simile, of the just dead, especially as an "Iroko" is indicative of the huge role he played in the community and the positive influence he had on the life of his people. The Iroko tree is an African tropical large hard wood, multi-functional, powerful and resistant tree of the forest which in this poem symbolises the person who has just passed on and whom, people will wish he had stayed on for the benefit of the weaker and less courageous ones, but death is not a respecter of persons. The simile comparing the people to sheep without shepherd speaks to the people's vulnerability in his absence.

Therefore, in spite of the titles acquired like Dr Babila and the impact made created in society, one must still die. However, the question is how one lives to prepare for death. Hakola and Kivisto, in the Introduction to *Death in Literature* opine that:

Death defines human lives on the basis that men are more or less conscious of their mortality. Some could argue that death robs life of meaning as everything comes to an end anyway. Others would claim that death gives meaning to life because it forces us to act on things now, not to wait for eternity. (xii)

In line with the above postulation, it can be said that M.A. Asanek and Dr Babilla have certainly made use of their lives by impacting positively on their societies. They have not waited for eternity but have worked hard to inspire their communities to better living. Their lives fall in line with Hakola and Kivisto's view that "individual death is not simply a private experience. It affects us and resonates in the surrounding society in many ways" (xv).

Inasmuch as one can be prepared to die, death creates anxiety in the living. Until those living die, they will not know how it feels like not to live. In "Icon and Beacon" and "Ebang Iroko," the expression "it will be our turn" indicates a constant reminder if not anxiety in the poet's mind regarding his own fateful hour. The poem entitled "The Changed Grove" also emphasises this point. Death is presented as an end point of the process of growth. Having moved from the stage of "a thoughtless youth" to "a pensive adult," (40) the speaker realises that the next stage is death. Like a "howling wind among the trees" (40), thoughts about death hover around the speaker's mind because it is an inevitable stage. The corpses he sees at every funeral reminds him of this sad truth. The persona is not an exception: all living things bloom, grow old and die and so will he. This is reminiscent of Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Tithonus" which serves as a meditation on the inevitability of death which we must all face. It is, therefore seen that in most of the poems that focus on death, Ambansom makes it a duty to remind all that everyone must one day, sooner or later, answer death's call.

Ambanasom does not only present death as a gradual evolution of life from birth to childhood, adulthood, old age and demise but strikes a reminder that people must be prepared to die at any point in time in whatever way. This is expressed in "The Talented Three" where the death of "Bate Besong, Ambe and Gwangwa'a/ Anglophone luminaries/...shocked all" (30). The shock does not just come as a result of their death but because of the unexpected and tragic way in which these great "luminaries" died. The persona laments:

*Oh yes, they came,
They dazzled,
They mesmerized,
But the talented three shocked us
When, within a split second, they bowed to death. (31)*

The death of these icons in a tragic car accident in Edea on the Douala-Yaounde Highway happened a few hours after Bate Besong's launch of his then new poetry collection, *Disgrace*, which generally is a scathing satire on the ills plaguing post-independent societies and the perpetrators of such ills. The shock with which the news was received is certainly a way of educating human beings of the need for preparedness at all times to quit the stage of life. The Catholic Prayer for Acceptance of Death throws more light on this as it reads:

*Most sacred Heart of Jesus,
I accept from your hands whatever
kind of death
it may please You to send me this day....*
(<https://www.catholic.org/prayers/prayer.php?p=549>)

The only certain thing one knows, therefore, is the reality of death and when, how, where and in what circumstances are out of the know for human beings.

Ambanasom's presentation of the inevitability of death is indeed a reminder to all and that everyone must answer the call whenever. Bregman in "The Death Awareness Movement" asserts that one of the beliefs of the Movement is that: "death is a natural event, part of the cycle of life. Like the seasons of the year, all organic life follows a cycle: it is born, grows and flourishes, then declines and dies. There is nothing to be gained by denying this, and it is a mark of human dignity to assent to what is 'natural,' universal and unavoidable" (416). If one considers the poems from this light thus, then there is no point worrying much about death but rather live meaningful lives so that one is prepared to die. In a way, he is teaching people how to accept and most especially cope with death. How one copes with death depends on one's attitude towards bereavement, grieving and mourning which is the focus of the following section.

Metaphors: Images of Loss and the Dynamics of Bereavement, Grieving and Mourning

As universal as death is, so too is bereavement, grieving and mourning, though these may be expressed in different ways in different societies. Walter differentiates among bereavement or loss, grieving and mourning when he points out that "bereavement" or "loss" refers to the state of having lost someone or something, "grief" refers to what is felt and "mourning" refers to what is done" (83). Similarly, Santrock gives a more elaborate perspective of grieving as he states that it is "the emotional numbness, disbelief, separation anxiety, despair, sadness and loneliness that accompany the loss of someone we love" (585). The extent of grief generally is dependent on the relationship shared with the deceased. That is why Tak, Wong and Patlamazoglou considering the views of other critics in "Bereavement and Coping following the Death of a Personally Significant Popular Musician" assert that:

An individual's relationship with the deceased plays a vital role in how they experience grief. Society creates expectations of bereavement for certain relationships (Harris, 2016). In contemporary societies, it is expected that the closer people are to the deceased, the more intensely they grieve the loss (Robson & Walter, 2013). The deaths of close friends or family are grieved more profoundly than those of acquaintances. (1234)

No doubt therefore, that grieving for the death of his young son, Bernard, absorbs the persona in "Healing Dreams" and "A Grain of Corn." These two poems represent the death of the persona's son who is allegedly poisoned by his school teacher and which brings in a lot of sadness in his life. The grieving here is serious because of the bond the speaker shares with his young dead son. Kimmel says that "Death is final, whether welcome or terrifying, whether we understand it or not...whether in the case of an athlete dying young, the clever lad slips away betimes, or is cut down in his prime, or another runs the good race of long life and slips quietly into everlasting rest, there is in every case, dominion, disinvestment and devastation..." (8). Kimmel's observation is reflected in the persona in "Healing Dreams," who is seriously affected by the demise of his son. The devastation is seen in the images the poet evokes. He laments:

*Great pals we were
Wherever I was, there you were.
At the dining table or in the shower,
like birds of a feather, we were spotted together. (63)*

His deep feeling of sorrow and devastation is not surprising for as Papalia, Olds and Feldman in *Human Development* posit, "a parent is rarely prepared emotionally for the death of a child. Such a death, no matter at what age comes as a cruel, unnatural shock, an untimely event that in the normal course of things, should not have happened" (E10). The persona in "Healing Dreams" after stating the great bond between him and his son goes ahead to highlight how devastated he felt at his death: "following your untimely demise, /I was totally devastated, / reduced to an emotional wreck, / and nearly demented" (63). The devastation is sure, felt this much because of the powerful connection he had with his son.

In the two poems mentioned above, the poet goes through different stages of grieving which could easily connect with those presented by Papalia, Olds and Feldman in *Human Development*. They are of the opinion that "the process of grief-work, the working out of psychological issues connected with grief takes the following pattern: shock and disbelief, preoccupation with the memory of the dead person and resolution" (E3). They further posit that "immediately following a death, survivors often feel lost and confused. As awareness of the loss sinks in, the initial numbness gives way to overwhelming feelings of sadness and frequent crying. The first stage may last several weeks, especially after a sudden or unexpected death" (E5). The death of the persona's son in "A Grain of Corn" is so unexpected and we hear him lament thus:

*Bernard Ambanasom, my son Bernard
your untimely death shook and shattered the very depth
of my existence, knocking down for a while
the pillars of my faith. (59)*

The overwhelming sadness is seen in the poet's choice of words: "shattered the very depth of my existence." When something is shattered, it is destroyed beyond repair or it generally is difficult to be repaired. Thus, he is in a desperate state of grief.

The second stage, according to Papalia, Olds and Feldman is the preoccupation with memory of the dead person and they say, "in the second stage...the survivor tries to come to terms with the death but cannot yet accept it. A widow may relive her husband's death and their entire relationship. From time to time, she may be seized by a feeling that her husband is present. The experiences diminish with time, though they may recur – perhaps for years – on such occasions as the anniversary of the marriage or death" (E8). Ambanasom's loss of his son hunts him for a long time especially due to the closeness he had with him. From the autobiographical perspective thus, the case in "Healing Dreams" is reflective of the bond shared by the persona and his dead son which could be compared to that of a husband and wife. The intimacy between the two makes it very difficult for him to forget about his son as it takes him a long time to come to terms with the painful reality. In stanza three, the persona recounts:

*For five years, I was haunted by your spirit;
For five years I walked like a ghost;
Yes, for five years, my heart bled painfully
Deep was the wound inflicted on my heart,
And it was sore and slow to heal. (63)*

The hurt expressed in the lines above is reminiscent of the poet's own life, upon the death of his beloved son, Bernard. So the inspiration of the poem is from the pain that the poet himself has felt. Spirits of dead people that persist in the world of the living is generally believed to be an indication of an unnatural state of affairs. The implication to the persona is that the child's life was ruthlessly taken away from him and therefore, not of natural cause. This explains why the spirit keeps hunting his father.

Still in "A Grain of Corn", even after ten years, the persona, like in "Healing Dreams," is still mourning the death of his son. He says:

*Bernard, my son, ten years have passed on
And you are still with us.
Indeed, you will never die.
So long as we breathe God's serene air,
So long as we draw sustenance
From his bountiful earth
So long as we plant and we harvest,
So long as we consume and propagate,
Your eternal grain of corn, you will continue to live with us. (60)*

The persona addresses the son directly, making us to understand that Bernard will never be forgotten for as long as he, the persona, lives. The third stage is resolution. They say, “the final stage has arrived when the bereaved person renews interest in everyday activities. Memories of the dead person bring fond feelings mingled with sadness, rather than sharp pain and longing” (E5). The persona in “The Grain of Corn” begins the poem with a lot of grief but as he draws to the last stanza, he is consoled as indicated in the following lines:

*That you are in Abraham's bosom.
We doubt it not, son.
We pray you to intercede for us, poor sinners.
As for your poisoner, well,
To the Almighty God
Belongs the ultimate verdict.
May his name be glorified.*

This last stanza of the poem sounds like a resolution and reveals the religiosity and christianity of the poet. “Abraham's bosom” signifies a place of rest, of peace and no suffering, in other words, heaven, where the persona believes his son now resides. Luke Chapter 16 verse 23 of the *Good News Bible* reads thus: The poor man died and was carried by the angels to sit beside Abraham at the feast in heaven. The rich man died and was buried and in Hades where he was in great pain... (1538). Abraham's bosom is therefore seen as a place of blessedness and if his son resides here, it gives him hope. This reassurance gives him joy that while there, he is able to intercede for them. At the beginning of the poem, the persona talks about his shattered faith for some time following the death of his son. In stanza five, the description of the teacher who allegedly poisoned his son as “traitor” “devil” “cruel man, your name is villainy” tells of how hurt he still is at the treacherous teacher. Then when we hear him in stanza eleven, the last stanza, surrendering all to “the Almighty God” who has the “ultimate verdict,” we are assured that he is mourning towards survival. Of course, he has accepted that there is nothing he can do about it except surrendering to God and moving on with life.

Grieving and mourning so hard as to lose balance is always discouraged. Papalia, Olds and Feldman aver that “some well-meaning friends tell parents not to dwell on their loss, but remembering the child in a meaningful way may be exactly what they need to do” (E10). Our focus here is on ‘remembering in a meaningful way.’ This is a positive way to mourn, that is, mourning for survival. Although with a feeling of devastation at the death of a significant other in one's life, it is important to mourn towards survival than death. Tony Walter in *What Death Means now* is of the opinion that though it is good to mourn,

... being incapacitated by grief for an extended period of time is not compatible with survival of the species – mourners would soon get eaten up by lions and their children starve. Genetic or cultural evolution would surely have selected against it. So, why is grief such a common

experience? The academic consensus is that attachment between humans, especially those to whom one is genetically related, is vital not only for survival but also for group cooperation and culture, and grief is a by-product of personal attachment. Yet grief has to be moderated by the need to survive... (83)

Ambanasom's other poems on death emphasise its monstrous might and underline the centrality of the belief in a supreme being when faced with death. In "A Grain of Corn", only God seems to be able to rekindle hope in a psychologically shattered person as the persona. Of course, it is generally believed that children should bury their parents. However, when the reverse becomes true, facilitated by a fellow human being whom one should trust as it was alleged the child was poisoned by his class teacher, the hurt of gross betrayal is evoked. Then, the feeling of devastation sets in and one way to deal with this can be to turn to God, as the persona does at the end of the poem, for consolation. Also, considering that this grain of corn as seen in the title of the poem symbolically represents his dead son, in reading with The Good News Bible in 1 Corinthians 15:36, there is hope as it talks about resurrection: "...when you sow a seed in the ground, it does not sprout to life unless it dies" (220). The hope in the resurrection of his son thus, comforts him.

To transcend the pervading destructive power of death, the speaker also uses his mind to resurrect images of and experiences lived with his dead son. In "Healing Dreams," the persona creates dreams about his dead son in order to soothe his emotional and psychological pains which are too much for him to bear. Dreaming here becomes a survival strategy and stress therapy to fight to come to terms with death. In dreaming about a dead loved one, one's brain might be trying to process one's feelings of the loved one coming to his/her conscious awareness. When the thoughts and feelings engraved in the subconscious rise to one's conscious awareness, they manifest in the form of dreams. These dreams can help one to move on from the difficulty and challenges of bereavement. Jessica Schrader in the blog, "Psychology Today" explains about the relevance of dreams in grieving in an article titled "Dreams and Grief: How Dreams Help us Grieve" as she affirms:

Actually, after a death, dreams of our loved ones are quite common. We know how important dreams are to our overall health and well-being, but dreams also play an important role in healing our grief. During the day, we can distract ourselves with various activities, but when we sleep, we are more relaxed and open. Our unconscious mind is free to wander and process the emotions we may try to avoid during the day.

The processing of thoughts and emotions help the bereaved give them an opportunity to live and relive life with the loved one whom he/she misses. It is in this light that dreams are seen to possess a soothing effect on the bereaved and consequently make loss and the grieving bearable. In "Healing Dreams: Healing and Wellness, Mystic, Shamanic

and Soul Inspiration and Shamanism,” it is stated that “tribal cultures say something is lost if we don’t take our dreams seriously enough to embody them - that we ignore them at the peril of our own souls, if not our lives... a healing dream often comes to redress imbalance” (<https://crossingworlds.com/healing-dreams/>).

During the period of bereavement and grieving, there tends to be psychological problems which ensue from the loss of a loved one. The psychological effects of bereavement include stress, depression, anxiety and sometimes thoughts of suicide. Healing dreams can rekindle hope and abate these symptoms. In “Healing Dreams,” the persona says:

*Following your untimely demise,
I was totally devastated, reduced to an emotional wreck
And nearly demented....*

*Yet those sorrowful years
Were also years of joy.
While in the day I grieved over your death,
In the night I rejoiced in my sleep.
I dreamt sweet dreams about you.
For five years, and almost every night,
You visited me in my sleep;
You came to me in my dreams
I dreamt that you and I were together
I dreamt sweet dreams about you.
O! a tonic they were, those dreams.
A boon, they were to my soul. (63-64)*

The dreams about his son literally help the persona to heal psychologically and emotionally and consequently improve his ability to deal with the son’s death. In dreams, he is able to escape the restrictions of space and time and delve into an utopian world, not only to assuage his pain but also to obtain an emotional and psychological closure. It is for this reason that he says of the Lord of Hades who visits him to tell him about the dream relationship between him and his son which has gone on for five years and the effect it has had on him. He says:

*The joy kept you healthy.
The comfort sustained your life
That happiness healed your heart
With your cardiac wound completely cured....*

*Thus spoke the Lord of Hades,
leaving my heart flowing with sensations sweet
and a mind teaming with happy thoughts of*

my son in Heaven. (65-66)

Visitation dreams as seen in “Healing Dreams” generally resolve the yearning for our deceased loved ones. The persona is able to get an emotional closure thanks to the dreams about his son who keeps visiting him for five years after his death. After the pronouncement of “The Lord of Hades,” he has a cathartic closure by thinking happily and positively about the dead son, accepting that he is indeed dead and gone to heaven. The Lord of Hades alluded to here is often referred to as the Lord of the Underworld, of the world of the dead. Therefore, if he is telling the persona that it is well with his son, it indeed is well.

Living a life that impacts positively on society plays a role in making the bereaved cope with death and vice versa especially in preparing for their own death which is certainly on the way. In this case, death should be a celebration of the life lived, of the accomplishments one has achieved and of the impact one has created in society. In our contemporary context with a lot of leadership mishaps like corruption, greed, nepotism, just to name these, one may begin to wonder if the death of such people who wield power as to be able to influence the life of others, should or can be celebrated. Also, it is of interest of those who wield such power, and to everyone else to reflect on what they will be remembered for.

Referring to Babila John Njingum as “Our brilliant and icon and beacon/our candle...” is indicative of his important role in society. The candle is symbolic of light, extraordinary deeds that illuminate the society and this of course is what he will be remembered for. As an icon, he is greatly admired and has great impact especially on education in his community. His prominence is symbolised in the beacon. In “On Losing my Hair” as well as in “The Talented Three” not only the inevitability of death and the manner as well as the cruel unpredictable ways in which life can be terminated comes to life, but also the legacies of what one leaves behind matters. Thus, the focus is not only on how we live but what we are remembered for. John W Santrock, quoting Leonardo da Vinci says “death should come to an individual after a full life, just as sleep comes after a day’s work” (579). A full life should certainly be a meaningful one and that which is impactful. In the “The Talented Three,” the persona finds hope in the legacies left behind by the talented three though shocked by the tragic way in which they die. He laments:

*...the talented three shocked us
When within a split second
They bowed to death
Leaving behind but their
Decapitated bodies, with their brains
Scattered in the wind to inspire humanity.
‘A terrible beauty is born.’ (31)*

The lives of the three are personified in their decapitated bodies and brains which will continue to positively impact society. Thus, though they die unexpectedly and untimely as many may consider, they have lived full lives that impact society with their dramatic and poetic art. Bate Besong's *Change Waka and His Man Sawa Boy*, *Requiem for the Last Kaiser*, *Beasts of No Nation*, just to name these are plays that stand out not only in Anglophone Literature but Cameroon and African Literature. The oxymoron in the last line "a terrible beauty has been born" is reminiscent of W. B. Yeats "Easter 1916" where there is a paradoxical transformation of Ireland through the Easter 1916 uprising. Therefore, though they leave in a very tragic way, they are remembered for the impact created.

Conclusion

In Ambanasom's *Homage and Courtship*, a good number of his poems focus on death. Homage as reflected in the title of the collection is reflective of the deference and honour which Amabansom accords to the various people the speakers refer to in these poems. This honour comes about as a result of the important and impactful roles that these people have played in their communities, leaving lasting fond memories. Death in the poems is an omnipresent force which though causes anxiety, anger and sadness is inevitable and therefore, preparing to die is important. Thus, living in fear of dying is not the solution but rather keeping away the fear and living to live forever: leaving positive legacies that will outlive you.

These positive legacies can also help one in preparing for his or her own departure from earth as one finds in "Icon and Beacon," "The Talented Three" and "Ebang Iroko." The impact of the personae in the poems is felt because of the positive legacies they have left behind them. This is important so that on dying, there should be no regrets. Santrock posits that "most dying individuals want an opportunity to make some decisions regarding their own life and death" (581). This is sometimes unrealistic because it is almost always late to make such decisions at that moment. If one has lived a remarkable life within his family and community, the memories make it easier for those grieving.

Thus, thoughts of death have an effect on those who die and those who are affected by the death. The grief caused by the departure of loved ones therefore is experienced depending on the relationship that was shared with the lost one. The grief is certainly much but can be assuaged not only by legacies but by healing dreams such as the case in "Healing Dreams" where the persona, through the joyful dreams about his lost loved son, is able to get an emotional and psychological closure. Another way of assuaging the terrible feeling that the death of a loved one leaves, according to the author, is to turn to God for solace such as in "A Grain of Corn." There are therefore several ways of grieving, mourning and managing the pain that comes with death. There is realism in his poetry ushered in with the use of local colour, names of people, places and occasions that one is familiar with and therefore brings his message to life.

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