Article History
Received 8 June 2025, Accepted 20 February 2026

COFFIN DANCE MANIA IN GHANA: VISUAL RHETORIC AND CULTURAL CONTEXT IN THE INTERNET AGE'S TAKE ON DEATH

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Abstract: This study examines how the Coffin Dance, a viral video of Ghanaian pallbearers performing choreographed funeral dances, became a globally circulated meme during the COVID pandemic that started in 2019. Analysing eight representative frames, I demonstrate that the video's compositional choices (low angles, designed flatness) create a grammar that dignifies the ritual while enabling its decontextualisation. This dual semiotic logic allowed the video to challenge Western mourning frameworks (which privatise grief and suppress celebration) while becoming appropriable for political ends. The findings highlight a structural tension in digital culture: non-Western ritual practices gain global legibility through the formal design that makes them vulnerable to commodification.

Keywords: visual semiotics, COVID-19, Ghanaian funeral practices, Black representation, viral media

Introduction

During the darkest months of COVID-19 in 2020, a viral video showed six men in suits dancing while carrying a coffin, often paired with clips of accidents that online culture calls "fail videos."[1] The Coffin Dance originates from Ghana's Akan funerals, where music and dance honour the deceased, express communal support, and mark death as a homecoming (Kquof et al. 2015; Selorm et al. 2021; Witte 2003). Rooted in Akan traditions, such

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1 DigiNeko (2020) documents an actual Ghanaian funeral procession in which a group of pallbearers, dressed in matching black suits, white shirts, and sunglasses, perform elaborately synchronised dance moves while carrying a coffin through the streets – dropping to their hands and knees before rising again in unison – surrounded by onlookers filming the event. This footage was soon repurposed for political commentary, as in Naar (2020), a meme-style edit that opens with the same pallbearers performing their signature moves outdoors, with white tents visible in the background, before cutting to a split-screen video call and then returning to the pallbearers carrying a coffin labelled "BIDEN PRESIDENT," swaying and lifting it energetically. In this context, the coffin dance frames a symbolic burial of a political moment (see the Black Bodies in Visual Culture section below).

10.26806/modafr.v14i1.629

ceremonies serve as both tribute and social reaffirmation. Elaborate music, dance, and public grief demonstrate that mourning is a communal obligation, reinforcing Akan beliefs in life's continuity beyond death (Adom and Adu Mensah 2022; Witte 2001). Death is understood as "a crisis requiring ritual treatment of the social body" (Jindra and Noret 2011), a moment situated within cyclical rather than linear time (Kershaw 1972, as cited in Droz 2011). Though celebratory funeral traditions exist worldwide – Irish wakes, Black American homegoing ceremonies, New Orleans jazz funerals, and among some Balkan and Roma communities – Western[2] death practices have become increasingly medicalised, privatised, and sombre (Ariès 1974; Giddens 1991; Laderman 2005; Walter 2017). In entering global circulation, the Coffin Dance revealed tensions already present between institutionalised mourning and expressive, communal grief.

By March 2020, as the pandemic spread, memers recast the pallbearers as public health messengers, pairing them with "epic failure" clips to encourage people to stay home (Clancy 2023: 435; Machirori 2024: 145; Marfo et al. 2022: 69–70). The group's leader, Benjamin Aidoo, acknowledged the shift: people would "rather stay home than be buried by [us]" (Paquette 2020). The Dancing Pallbearers' journey from local ritual to global meme is remediation (i.e., older media refashioned by new digital forms; see Bolter and Grusin 2000). First appearing on YouTube in 2015, they gained attention via a 2017 BBC documentary and went viral in 2020 with electronic music remixes (Adrada 2023; Lansah 2017; Travelin Sister 2015). As the meme circulated globally, it was reframed across diverse contexts, including a 2020 Trump campaign ad that used the pallbearers to mock Biden's gaffe regarding Black voters (Naar 2020; see the *Discussion* below). But instead of settling meaning, remediation sets it in motion. The video thus operated as a floating signifier within racialised discourse, its meaning shifting depending on who deployed it and toward what ends (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mehlman 1972).

What follows is an attempt to work through three research questions, using semiotic visual analysis and meme studies: (RQ1) How do Ghanaian funeral practices challenge Western mourning when transformed into memes? (RQ2) How does the video complicate the circulation of Black bodies in global visual culture? And (RQ3) what does it mean that, during a pandemic, death became entertainment? I contribute (1) a close semiotic

2 In the present article, "Western" refers to dominant Euro-American cultural discourses shaped by European modernity and transatlantic institutions, while acknowledging the term's limits and internal heterogeneity (see Chakrabarty 2000; Mignolo 2000).

reading of the pallbearers' choreography, (2) an account of how viral circulation reconfigures localised ritual meaning, and (3) an argument about the simultaneous commodification and dignification of Black bodily labour in transnational visual culture.

Paradigm of Death

To understand what the Coffin Dance disrupts, we need to trace how Western culture manages death. What psychological and sociocultural mechanisms underlie Western preoccupation with grief? Scholars debate whether modern societies deny death (Ariès 1974; Gorer [1965] 1977) or manage it through medicalisation and privatised mourning (Fuchs 1969, as cited in Illich 1995: 202). The "death-denial" thesis has been influential. Scholars have been questioning its explanatory value for decades now (Kellehear 1984; Tradii and Robert 2017). What's clearer, what emerges more consistently across the critiques, is medicalisation's role in reshaping grief (Illich 1995). Not denial, exactly. Management. Sigmund Freud described grief as inhabiting "a world which has become poor and empty" ([1917] 2024: 219). Institutional management imposes temporal expectations on this phenomenology, treating prolonged mourning as pathology. Within psychological discourse, grief may become intensified or prolonged beyond culturally expected norms, giving rise to clinical concerns (Horowitz et al. 1980), and in some cases, to diagnostic categories such as prolonged grief disorder (Prigerson et al. 2009). When grief is treated as a kind of illness, and when people are expected to recover on time – to diagnose it, manage it, and move on – the result can be compounded suffering, alongside anxiety and depression (Ariès 1974; Granek 2010).

How grief is made visible and tangible reflects a medicalised, privatised world, and in doing so, makes that world feel normal. Scholars have examined "mourning pictures" (Ariès 1974; Fahd 2019; Zarzycka 2014), media portrayals (Hilliker 2006), cinema (Armstrong 2012), and digital technologies (Cupit et al. 2021; Segerstad et al. 2022; Stylianou-Lambert and Widmaier 2023) as places where grief appears restrained, private, sorrowful. Rarely, if ever, celebratory. These images teach us how to mourn – and what they teach is suppression (Doss 2006).

Historically, death has shifted from a communal experience, in which "community was weakened by the loss of one of its members" (Ariès [1981] 2008), to a private one (Giddens 1991; Rae 2007; Tarlow 1999). While death

has periodically re-emerged into public visibility through memorials and monuments (Doss 2002, 2006; Roberts 2004), these forms remain shaped by the same logics of privatisation and institutional mediation that structure contemporary Western mourning.

Danse Macabre

The Ghanaian group offers a different paradigm entirely. They are paid to "send loved ones to the other world in style" (Lansah 2017), a paradigm where grief gives way to celebration. But dancing with death is not new, though the meaning of that dance shifts across cultures and eras. Macabre images of decomposing corpses dancing alongside symbolic figures of society date back to the Middle Ages (Dujakovic 2020; Fein 2000, 2013; Oosterwijk and Knöll 2011). The Danse Macabre depicts emperors, kings, popes, cardinals, and other figures of authority, all undone by death represented as a naked, grinning corpse. The living appear in stiff, corpse-like poses, bewildered by their sudden confrontation with death, dance serving as allegory for mortality's inevitability. The effect is a farcical inversion of the social order (peasants, women, or fools, over the powerful): the dead mock the living's futile resistance, underscoring the ultimate triumph of death over all social distinctions (Dujakovic 2020: 261–262; Fein 2000: 4). It is a visual rhetoric, with emperors and peasants rendered equal before death, that derives its power from direct address.

Fein (2013: 227) argued that Danse Macabre's potency, whether in visual or verbal form, lies in its personalised confrontation with death – a detailed demonstration of one's eventual appearance, an animated corpse ruthlessly mocking its audience. According to Kinch (2017), the alternation between images of the dead and the living creates "a rhythmic pattern of movement and tranquillity, of light and colour, of existence and mortality, resonating deeply with essential aspects of human culture, rooted in the dynamic between life and death." This interplay reflects a profound human understanding that life and death are inseparable, each defining the other and together offering a complete picture of existence. The Coffin Dance shares this choreographic engagement with mortality. And yet, as we'll see, it distances itself from mockery (of the living's resistance) and advances the celebration of communal passage. Like medieval plague imagery, the COVID-19 pandemic revived visual confrontations with mass mortality, though transformed through digital mediation and memetic circulation.

Black in Visual Culture

The global spread of the Coffin Dance makes sense only when set against the contested history of Black representation in Western visual culture, particularly within the United States where the video's political appropriation was most prominent. From Jim Crow-era caricatures to Black Lives Matter, the visual portrayal of Black people has always been politically charged, reflecting shifting contests over representation and power (Bradley 2021; Edrington and Gallagher 2019; Gondwe and Bhowmik 2022; Lemons 1977; Lewis and Lewis 2009). Bell Hooks (2004: 65) notes that these portrayals reflect broader social power dynamics and racial oppression. Visual culture often treats Black bodies as commodities for white audiences, echoing historical patterns of exploitation and sustaining racial hierarchies (see Hooks 2015: 104–106; Yancy 2017). These patterns of commodification work through the instability of racial signification.

Stuart Hall (1997: 32) draws on Ferdinand de Saussure to show that signifiers (words or images) are arbitrarily linked to their meanings, which can shift as cultural contexts change. Historically, the word "black" in Western societies was linked with negativity and darkness. During the 1960s in the United States, the slogan "Black is Beautiful" transformed these associations, reclaiming black to signify pride and empowerment among Black communities (Hall 1997: 32). Yet, the reclamation was simultaneously contested: politicians such as Barry Goldwater used urban uprisings to stoke fears of Black criminality, setting the stage for the later "tough-on-crime" policies (Alexander 2010: 41). This pattern intensified in the 1980s. The Reagan administration's portrayal of crack cocaine amplified public fear with images of Black "crack whores" and "crack babies," shaping perceptions and justifying harsher drug policies (Alexander 2010: 5). Media further shifted from depicting white cocaine users as victims to framing crack cocaine as a threat posed by Black communities, reflecting entrenched racial biases and influencing policies and public opinion (Alexander 2010: 102–03). Hall (1997) rejected the notion of fixed meanings, emphasising that all interpretations arise within particular historical and cultural contexts. Representations in visual culture change over time, shaped by these contexts, and as a result, racialised imagery continues to shape perceptions of crime and contributes to the justification of hate toward Black people. The Coffin Dance enters this contested terrain: as it circulates globally, the pallbearers function as floating signifiers whose meaning shifts depending on who deploys the image and toward what ends.

Memes and Black Humour

The Coffin Dance sits – uncomfortably, productively – at the intersection of memetic culture and Black visual representation. You cannot understand how it circulates without holding both histories in view.

Memes exist to be remixed; it is in their nature (Shifman 2014; Milner 2016). Users combine image, text, and audio in new ways, becoming "prosumers" who do not just watch content, but change it as it moves through the world (Ivashkevich 2015; Jenkins 2018). As a result, memes function as cultural products that can mirror and reinforce dominant ideologies and subvert or reframe narratives through remediation and juxtaposition (see Knobel and Lankshear 2007; Ungureanu 2024). This is not a bug or a glitch that we need to fix but an intrinsic logic of participatory cultures themselves, one that the Coffin Dance taps into through a very specific register: black humour.

Black humour, or dark comedy, cynically engages serious, taboo, or morbid topics, subverts norms, and has historically helped individuals confront trauma and absurdity (Bodó 2023). Its appeal often lies in the tension between discomfort and recognition, a dynamic that digital formats amplify. Memes' rapid dissemination and adaptability make them well-suited for black humour, encapsulating complex ideas concisely and relying on shared cultural contexts, particularly among youth (Bhardwaj et al. 2024; Okafor 2024; Hakoköngäs et al. 2020). Unsurprisingly, such memes tend to surface during periods of collective strain or uncertainty. They often address social issues like death or mental illness (e.g., COVID-19 memes) and foster solidarity among like-minded audiences (De Blasio and Selva 2019; Kirmani 2024).

But – and this is where things get darker – the same memes that help people process trauma can desensitise viewers, normalise racist or sexist attitudes, perpetuate stereotypes, raising ethical concerns in digital spaces (Mortensen and Neumayer 2021; Sanchez 2020; Duchscherer and Dovidio 2016; Matamoros-Fernández et al. 2022). The structure that enables solidarity also enables violence. This dual capacity (creative expression on the one hand, exclusion, harm on the other) shows the ambivalence inherent in participatory culture, and Coffin Dance exemplifies it by enabling collective mourning during COVID-19 while simultaneously becoming extractable for political appropriation, as the following analysis demonstrates.

Methodology

This study performs a qualitative semiotic analysis of the Coffin Dance video, examining its cultural and symbolic meanings through the frameworks developed by Saussure ([1916] 2011) and Roland Barthes ([1957] 1972). The analysis draws on distinctions between signifier and signified, denotation and connotation, and Barthes's notion of myth (see Barthes 1977; Fiske [1982] 2002). Following Saussure ([1916] 2011: 66, 120–21), meaning is understood as relational, arising from differences, from contrasts between elements. Not inherent properties but structural positions. Barthes ([1957] 1972: 113–14, 142–43) theorises myth as a second-order semiological system, a "metalanguage" (a language that describes or analyses another language system) that appropriates existing cultural signs and naturalises historically contingent meanings, rendering them self-evident and depoliticised. Myth hides construction and makes culture look like nature. The analysis thus examines how visual and gestural elements function denotatively (literal representation) and connotatively (culturally coded meaning), attending to how the video's compositional choices construct a mythic narrative of communal mourning.

Following Shifman (2014: 177), who defines memes as units "created with awareness of each other," this analysis centres on the source video, since derivative forms remix and recirculate its visual motifs while preserving the semiotic structure established in the original. The present study examines a 35-second segment (1:32–2:07) of the video in which the pallbearers are introduced and perform their synchronised dance while carrying the coffin (DigiNeko 2020). This sequence condenses the visual and symbolic motifs that later recur across derivative meme forms, including fail videos and image macros. Eight representative frames – selected from distinct cut transitions within the segment (which mark shifts in composition, gesture, and rhythm that structure the video's meaning) – serve as the basis for close visual analysis. While frame selection involves interpretive judgment, the analysis is grounded in repeated viewings and attention to compositional elements (framing, colour, gesture) that structure visual meaning across frames.

The Coffin Dance

The first frame (Fig. 1) foregrounds the lower extremities of three figures, drawing attention to their footwear. The composition – just slightly asymmetrical – centres

on the feet. Natural lighting suggests an outdoor setting, while dark grey trousers and polished black-and-white shoes create moderate contrast and a formal, retro aesthetic. The low-angle shot emphasises the design of the shoes and the performers' relaxed stance. The shoes' polished, two-toned style signifies elegance, discipline, and careful self-presentation. They function as a semiotic bridge between Ghanaian funeral traditions and a globalised visual economy in which ceremonial performance is stylised (choreographed) and rendered legible to international audiences. Barthesian myth (1957/1972: 107-108) naturalises this choreographed elegance as universally legible "dignity," obscuring the culturally specific Akan framework that produces this visual grammar.

Figure 1. Screenshot at second 1 from "Coffin Dance (Official Music Video HD)" (DigiNeko 2020)

Seen at eye level, the second frame (Fig. 2) – a medium shot – draws the viewer into the scene. The pallbearers are arranged in a vertical alignment: one figure faces the camera directly, while the other three distribute the composition according to the rule of thirds, producing symmetry and visual balance. All four wear dark suits with crisp white shirts and neatly folded white pocket squares. The classic tailoring (structured jackets and clean lines) creates a unified, almost uniform appearance. Lapel pins or badges further emphasise their belonging to an organised group. The man on the left wears a tall top hat, setting him apart with a note of dignified, almost archaic elegance, while the others wear matching fez-like caps with a contrasting diagonal band, reinforcing the ceremonial cohesion of the group. Dark sunglasses worn by all four add visual consistency and an aura of authority. Light-coloured ties maintain a high-contrast palette within the black-and-white image, and the decorated cloth or sash held by one figure suggests symbolic or ritual significance.

Figure 2. Screenshot at second 3

The scene unfolds outdoors, likely in a public or ceremonial space. Trees and foliage in the background evoke a park, cemetery, or open communal area. Even lighting lends documentary quality. With no prominent architectural

elements and only indistinct figures in the distance, the background remains unobtrusive.

Four men (three on the right of the image, one on the left, barely visible, but present with his shoulder), with sunglasses, hats, white shirts, and dark suits, carry an expensive-looking coffin in front of what resembles a musical funeral procession (note the drummer in the background, on the right), their bodies arranged in a linear formation that anchors the composition (Fig. 3). What distinguishes this moment is the energy it preludes; you feel as if, shortly after, these men will break into dance.

Figure 3. Screenshot at second 5

Through the logic of montage, within seconds, the pallbearers are transported to a similar event, this time with the casket, more prominent than in the previous shots, and their kneeling posture brought into focus (Fig. 4). Composition, while not strictly aligned with the rule of thirds, remains balanced: seven figures are present, two fully visible and five partially obscured by the casket or truncated by the frame. Strong contrast between the pallbearers' black attire and the white casket, whose colour shifts from that of the previous scene (Fig. 3), draws attention to both the object and the figures.

Figure 4. Screenshot at second 11

The colour of the casket carries particular cultural weight. While black has been associated with funerary rites and death since the Neolithic period (Pastoureau 2009: 30–35), and later came to signify penance in the medieval Christian tradition (Kress and van Leeuwen 2002: 348), white has often been understood, especially within Christian theology, as a sign of life and hope (Pastoureau 2009: 38, 132), and within Protestant dress codes as a "pure colour (…) recommended for children's and sometimes women's clothing." For Western viewers, the white casket may be read as inflecting the funerary scene with connotations of purity, reverence, or even as a moral decorum. Whether this resonates with Akan interpretations remains unclear from the visual text alone.

The scene unfolds in a wide shot of a crowded outdoor setting organised around the casket from Frames 1–3, with similar attire and props (Fig. 5).

Figure 5. Screenshot at second 13

Numerous figures populate the frame: some mingle and converse, while others appear to dance, creating an atmosphere closer to a social gathering than a strictly solemn ceremony. This impression is reinforced by the diversity of dress, ranging from formal outfits, such as women in long festive dresses, to more casual clothing, including a man in a blue T-shirt holding a trumpet. Despite the visual abundance, the composition centres on the pallbearers – their body language suggests coordinated movement: legs and arms are positioned to support the casket, and there is a sense of rhythm implied by their postures, even in the still frame – and the coffin, establishing balance and depth. A figure dressed in a black-and-white body covering, resembling either a robe or a garment associated with premodern attire, approaches the carried coffin, creating visual variety without detracting from the central figures. The eye-level perspective invites the viewer into the scene, balancing immediacy with compositional clarity.

The coffin functions as a point of convergence within a dense social field. Its central placement acquires meaning through the surrounding bodies, tents, and movement that situate the ritual in open communal space. The pallbearers' symmetrical formation provides a stabilising axis within this visual abundance, organising attention while allowing peripheral activity to remain active and visible. This compositional structure renders the ritual simultaneously focused and diffuse; a concentrated act embedded within everyday social circulation. And so, meaning arises through relations between centre and periphery, coordination and dispersal.

Figure 6. Screenshot at second 16

In the foreground, in a medium shot at second sixteen, the pallbearers support the casket on their bent and spread legs, stabilising its weight (Fig. 6). Three face away from the camera, one faces forward with his expression visible, and one or two others are partially flanked, sensed only through their role in balancing the coffin. Their raised hands release the casket, and hold white handkerchiefs. Slight motion blur conveys movement

and transition. The off-centre placement of the coffin accentuates dynamism and the sense of action. In the background we see an open tent, distant figures gathered beneath it, and trees. The pallbearers' asymmetrical stance energises the composition.

The handkerchiefs mark the first appearance of a ceremonial prop beyond attire, amplifying the ritual's gestural vocabulary. The asymmetrical stance (bent legs, raised arms, off-centre coffin) generates compositional energy absent from the vertical alignment (Fig. 2) or linear formation (Fig. 3). Where earlier frames stabilised ritual through symmetry and balance, Figure 6 destabilises through asymmetry and blur, rendering mourning as kinetic performance.

Figure 7. Screenshot at second 27

The pallbearers' backs are bent, as if they are straining to lift the casket, which lies close to the ground between them (Fig. 7). A colourful figure occupies the foreground, partially framing and obstructing the action and creating an off-centre focal point. Another outsider, closer to the pallbearers but still apart from the crowd, is a man in casual clothing (bright pants and a white T-shirt with a green stripe) holding a camera or mobile phone, likely recording the moment. The slightly lower angle captures their actions and interactions. Some spectators on the right also hold mobile phones, seemingly recording the scene. This time, the crowd keeps its distance, forming what appears to be a circle around the event.

The colourful foreground figure inserts non-ritual presence into the ritual's visual field and disrupts hierarchy. Similarly, the people with cameras and mobile phones mark a shift from performance to documentation, anticipating the video's remediation as meme. The circular arrangement of spectators creates spatial containment, framing the pallbearers as bounded spectacle (contrast Figures 3 and 5). The bent postures and low casket emphasise physical effort, mourning as embodied labour, not just symbolic gesture.

The last frame presents the pallbearers from a low angle, monumentalising their presence through frontal, poster-like compression (Fig. 8). The shot faces the group head-on. The pallbearers stand aligned: two visible in front, heads tilted slightly forward and to the side, and one in back, likely the coordinator, whose head peeks out beneath the casket. In the background, an open tent and a few white umbrellas. The frame continues from Figure 7: spectators recording remain

visible, but the angle has shifted, the casket lifted, the anonymous foreground figure disappeared.

Figure 8. Screenshot at second 30

The low-angle perspective monumentalises the pallbearers. The shot's frontal, poster-like compression shifts this monumentalisation from depth to iconicity – the frame is visually self-contained, legible at small scale, and extractable from its video context. Where Figure 7 shows spectators recording the ritual, Figure 8 shows the ritual formally composed for circulation: the flatness creates a meme-ready aesthetic through internal design. The coordinator's visibility introduces internal hierarchy within the group, differentiating roles (organiser vs. carriers) previously treated as collective. The montage shift from bent labour (Fig. 7) to upright monumentality (Fig. 8) transforms embodied effort into static icon, obscuring the physical work beneath the ceremonial image.

Discussion

The Coffin Dance video operates through a dual semiotic logic: it embeds the ritual in communal space while extracting it as a bounded spectacle. This tension, between ritual participation and ritual commodification, structures the video's transformation from local Ghanaian funeral practice into global meme. The eight frames show how this works compositionally. The video establishes ritual dignity through synecdoche (Fig. 1: polished shoes as metonym for formality) and hierarchical differentiation (Fig. 2: top hat distinguishes leader), then destabilises this solemnity through kinetic transformation. Anticipatory stillness (Fig. 3) gives way to asymmetrical blur and gestural props (Fig. 6: handkerchiefs), culminating in monumental iconicity (Fig. 8: low-angle frontal compression). Here is what matters: the video situates the pallbearers within social circulation (Fig. 5: centre/periphery tension, festive mixing with formal) while simultaneously framing them as performance-for-cameras (Fig. 7: spectators recording, circular containment). Embedded and extracted at once. The chromatic shift from light-brown to white casket (Fig. 4) inflects the scene with Christian connotations of purity and hope, translating Akan belief into globally legible visual grammar. This designed reproducibility (formal flatness, self-contained iconicity, extractability from video context) anticipates the video's remediation as meme before that circulation occurs.

Challenging Western Mourning Frameworks

Where Western mourning signifies through uniformity, stasis, and privatised grief (Ariès 1974; Giddens 1991; Laderman 2005), the Coffin Dance generates meaning through kinetic disruption and communal embedding (RQ1). The video's visual grammar challenges Western funeral conventions by pairing formality with celebration. The pallbearers' black suits and synchronised formation initially signal solemnity (Figs. 1–2), establishing visual continuity with Western mourning codes. But the subsequent kinetic transformation – from vertical alignment (Fig. 2) to anticipatory energy (Fig. 3) to destabilising asymmetry and blur (Fig. 6) – ruptures these associations. This is formality mobilised, creating a semiotic structure in which dignity and celebration coexist.

The video's centre/periphery composition (Fig. 5) further distinguishes it from Western funeral imagery. Where Western mourning practices increasingly isolate grief as individual experience (Ariès 1974; Giddens 1991), Figure 5 embeds the ritual in dense social circulation: the pallbearers provide a stabilising axis, but peripheral activity, such as dancing, conversing and festive dress mixing with formal attire, remains visible and active. The ritual is simultaneously focused and diffuse, a concentrated act within everyday communal space. This compositional structure mythologises (in Barthes's sense) death as communal passage, naturalising the Akan understanding of death as homecoming (Witte 2003) for global audiences unfamiliar with this framework.

Like the medieval Danse Macabre, the Coffin Dance depicts death as levelling social hierarchies (Dujakovic 2020; Fein 2000). But where Danse Macabre mocked the living's futile resistance to mortality, the Coffin Dance celebrates death as ritual affirmation and communal cohesion. The shift from memento mori (remember you will die) to ritual homecoming (death as transition, not termination) reframes mortality within a paradigm Western audiences have largely abandoned since the decline of public, celebratory death rituals.

Black Bodies in Visual Culture

The video's formal design – particularly its monumentalisation through low-angle framing and frontal compression (Fig. 8) – positions Black bodies as dignified, authoritative, and visually commanding (RQ2). This contrasts with historical patterns in which Black bodies in Western visual culture have been commodified, exoticised, or framed within narratives of tragedy and

suffering (Hooks 2004, 2015; Yancy 2017). The pallbearers are neither victims nor exotic others; they are ritual specialists performing skilled, coordinated labour with cultural authority.

Figure 9. Screenshot of Donald Trump's "Biden's Coffin Dance Video Meme" as presented in Naar (2020)

This dignified representation becomes unstable as the video circulates beyond its original context. Let us consider the case of US President Donald Trump's use of the Coffin Dance video: his predecessor Joe Biden blunders during an interview by making a racially insensitive remark (Fig. 9). The inexpedient and infamous assertion that if the Black audience were unsure of whether to vote for him or Trump, then "[they] aren't Black!" is followed by the dance of the Ghanaian Pallbearers (Naar 2020). The reaction of Charlamagne Tha God is telling. He freezes when Biden makes that remark, evidently unsure of how to respond. But Trump knows. The change is sudden, transitioning from a political discourse (the US election) to a funeral. In this instance, we observe that the pallbearers are not the cause of "death" (i.e., an implied death or a potential death of Biden's campaign, possibly leading to an election loss). The cause would be Biden's imprudent, rushed response. In return, the pallbearers served as the messengers or escorts, as suggested by the campaign logo present on the coffin carried by the bearers. What the ad shows – brutally, efficiently – is how the visual rhetoric, initially rooted in Akan beliefs about a dignified transition to the afterlife, became a floating signifier within American racial discourse, where Black bodies, Black death, and Black celebration have historically been sites of contested political meaning (see Hooks 2004, 2015; Yancy 2017). Its effectiveness depended on audiences reading the pallbearers as simultaneously dignified and mocking, a duality produced by the video's passage across radically different interpretive contexts.

This dual reading – celebration and mockery, dignity and spectacle – is encoded in the video's formal structure. The monumentalising low angle (Fig. 8) elevates the pallbearers, but the poster-like flatness and frontal compression also render them extractable, reproducible, and decontextualisable. The frame is designed for circulation, anticipating its remediation as meme. The spectators recording with cameras and phones

(Fig. 7) mark the shift from performance to documentation, from ritual act to archivable commodity. The pallbearers are simultaneously ritual actors and visual commodities, performing for immediate witnesses but also for the logic of digital remediation. This designed reproducibility renders the video's global circulation vulnerable to appropriation in contexts (like the Trump ad) that instrumentalise Black bodies for political ends.

Death as Entertainment During COVID-19

Fail videos maintained consistent structure: mistake followed by pallbearers, as in the viral skiing video by @lawyer_ggmu (Kotowski 2022: 55; Mansoor 2020: 128) (RQ1). This crisp juxtaposition transforms the pallbearers into symbolic escorts guiding the transition from action to consequence, mirroring their ritual role in guiding the deceased from life to afterlife.

During the pandemic, Aidoo and his crew were reframed as Grim Reapers (see Paquette 2020), a symbol often used to depict death, typically envisioned as a man or a cloaked skeleton carrying a scythe. In some instances, the Grim Reaper can cause the victim's death by coming to collect that person's soul (Cánovas 2011, as cited in Breault 2014). In other interpretations, it functions as a messenger, one that does not decide who dies, or an escort of the newly deceased (Card and Wilson 2006). And so, the pallbearers became symbolic messengers of pandemic mortality: their silhouettes, sunglasses, and accompanying music made them recognisable symbols of death's presence. But unlike the Grim Reaper (skeletal, threatening, wielding a scythe), these figures retained their dignified, celebratory character. Death remained inevitable, but the escort remained festive.

The Orthodox meme (Fig. 10) extends this logic through cultural juxtaposition. Posted on 15 April 2020, during Orthodox Easter, the meme superimposes the pallbearers' heads onto Orthodox priests' bodies, situating them at an altar with religious iconography. The juxtaposition creates absurdist humour: solemn Orthodox Easter imagery (vestments, altar, cross, and the depiction of Jesus Christ) meets the lively Ghanaian dance

Figure 10. Meme of the Coffin Dance pallbearers, published on 2Meme (facebook.com/2Memeee/; April 15, 2020)

known for accompanying dramatic or unexpected outcomes. By placing the pallbearers in priestly vestments, the meme suggests they fulfil a similar transitional role, guiding souls from life to afterlife with dignity and, in their cultural tradition, celebratory farewell. The meme translates the pallbearers' ritual function into a different religious register, revealing the universal aspects of death ritual (transition, escort, communal witnessing) beneath culturally specific forms. Posted during a period when death dominated global news and Orthodox Easter observances were restricted by pandemic lockdowns, the meme offered comic relief during a grim period, leveraging the unexpectedness of seeing serious religious figures replaced by dancing pallbearers.

So, what does it mean that, during a pandemic, death became entertainment? I keep returning to this question because it seems, initially, obscene. But the video operates dually and that duality matters (RQ3). On the one hand, the Coffin Dance meme helped people cope with pandemic-related death anxiety (Akram et al. 2021; Myrick et al. 2021), offering a framework in which death could be acknowledged without being dwelt upon, faced with humour not paralysis (cf. Chudzik 2021 on carnivalesque responses to pandemic death anxiety). The meme's repetitive format (fail → consequence → pallbearers) created ritual structure in a moment when traditional death rituals were disrupted by lockdowns and social distancing.

On the other hand, the meme risked trivialising mortality through its ubiquity and comedic framing. The designed reproducibility identified in Fig. 8 (flatness, iconicity, extractability) enabled endless remixing and detached the image from its ritual origins. The pallbearers became visual shorthand for "death" or "failure" without the Akan cultural framework that understands death as homecoming and communal passage. This is the cost of global circulation.

During the pandemic, as in-person gatherings became restricted, funerals moved online: families livestreamed ceremonies, mourners participated virtually, and digital platforms became central for collective grieving (Burrell and Selman 2022; MacNeil et al. 2021). The Coffin Dance meme represented something different from virtual funerals that sought to replicate traditional practices digitally. The meme was a ritual redesigned for digital circulation, favouring celebration over solemnity and viral sharing over private mourning. Its popularity coincided with pandemic conditions that heightened death's presence in daily life while prompting new digital ways to process it. The meme thus belongs to a moment when COVID-19

forced grief onto screens and into circulation while creating entirely new emotional and ritual experiences, experiences in which death became something people could face together, joke about, fear deeply, and hold at a distance, sometimes all at the same time.

Conclusion

The Coffin Dance exposes a structural paradox in digital visual culture. The formal properties that make a non-Western ritual readable to global audiences – low-angle framing, designed flatness, the progressive movement from communal embedding to bounded spectacle, and the chromatic and sartorial grammar of formality – are exactly the ones that expose it to decontextualisation, commodification, and political misuse. The semiotic analysis conducted here traces that logic step by step. The video begins by embedding the ritual in communal space, grounding it in the social density of shared movement and collective witness. It then moves, progressively, toward a visual mode that flattens and concentrates, producing a self-contained image that can be read at a glance and reproduced across contexts. That movement draws on the authority established through formal attire and monumental framing, and it simultaneously makes the pallbearers portable in ways their original cultural context could not fully control (given that the logic of digital remediation operates independently of the intentions embedded in local ritual practice).

The observation carries a broader implication for how participatory media relates to cultural difference. Non-Western practices gain global legibility by conforming, at least in part, to a visual logic that the dominant media economy already knows how to circulate. Global reach, therefore, comes at the cost of cultural specificity, and the Coffin Dance makes that cost visible.

Limitations and Future Directions

This analysis examines how the Coffin Dance produces meaning through formal composition but cannot account for why it became a global meme or how diverse audiences interpret it. A reception study examining user-generated remixes (fail compilations, TikTok adaptations, political appropriations) would reveal whether viewers read the video as celebratory, ironic, or both, and how these readings shift across cultural contexts. Ethnographic work with the pallbearers themselves and with Ghanaian

audiences could clarify intended meanings behind the choreography, which may differ from the circulating meanings analysed here.

Future research could compare the original video with its derivative meme forms to trace how semiotic elements (gesture, colour, rhythm, spatial logic) are retained, transformed, or discarded in remediation. Do fail videos preserve the kinetic energy (Figs. 3, 6) or only the iconicity (Fig. 8)? How do different meme formats (GIFs, image macros, video compilations) privilege different aspects of the source material? Additionally, analysing other examples of African cultural performance that circulate as memes (South African gqom dance videos, Nigerian wedding celebrations) could reveal whether the formal logic identified here (flatness, iconicity, designed reproducibility) is unique to this video or indicative of a broader memetic aesthetic that structures how non-Western cultural practices are translated for global digital circulation.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest is reported by the author.

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