

Identity Construction in Narrative Discourse: A Case for the Narrator or the Narrated

Jane Yorke Obuajo

University of Media Arts and Communication - Institute of Languages. (UniMAC-IL)

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how identities are constructed for deceased persons in the Akan community in Ghana through narrative discourse. Fifteen (15) biographies of Akan deceased persons aged seventy (70) or older were sampled from over fifty (50+) sourced biographies. The data were analysed using Labov's six-stage narrative model and the social constructionist theory. The analysis showed that close relations of the deceased constructed identities for them through the biographies. These identities are enacted for the deceased in line with the socio-cultural practices of the community. In constructing an identity for the deceased, the narrators reflect on and choose events of the storyline of the decease that also construct their own identity; the narrator(s), being an in-group person(s), readily saw themselves through the story being narrated (for deceased) thereby negotiating identity for both the narrator and the deceased (narrated). This corroborates the Foucauldian assertion that (speaking) subjects (the narrator through the narrated) engages with their respective discursive communal practices to form their world. Practices and expectations of the cultural background of the subjects involved inform the foregrounding to major themes and identities.

Keywords: biographies, social constructionism, narratives, identities, and narrative model.

INTRODUCTION

Until much scholarship came up to expose how identity is constructed in discourse, human identity as a phenomenon was perceived as stable and biologically grounded. From the 1960s, this notion began changing into a more progressive and contemporary one, revealing that identity is multiple, dynamic, and socially constructed. Different people have a different appreciation of the term "identity". Basically, it is the "who" and "what" of the individual which is dependent on context, occasion, and purpose, as depicted in the citation below:

Identity is a label attributed to the attempt to differentiate and integrate a sense of self along different social and personal dimensions. Consequently, identities can be differentiated and claimed according to varying socio-cultural categories, e.g., gender, age, race, occupation, gangs, socio-economic status, ethnicity, class, nation states, or regional territory (Bamberg, 2010, p.4).

Identity, then, is not a fixed, intrinsic label; it is a product of the individual's lived experiences. It comes out as the dynamic and reflexive product of all the inputs from their social, political, and historical life (Gergen 1988). In this analysis of identity by Gergen, there is a unique "you" seen from different angles of circumstances and by performative roles. However, all culminate into the holistic "you" that a person is. In this regard, identity is said to "figuratively combine the intimate or personal world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relationships ...lived in and through activity and so must be conceptualised as one (a people in focus) develops in social practice" (Holland et al., 1998, p.50). Conceptually, the phenomenon of identity is essential because it explains social and cultural practices and changes (Woodward, 1987). Bruner (1990) asserts that "it is culture, not biology, that shapes human life and the human mind, that gives meaning to action by situating its underlying intentional states in an interpretive system" (p. 34). Assertions like these open us up for reflection on our cultural systems in line with our identities. Regarding this study, our reflections eventually gave birth to several questions, one of which is this pertinent one: Who is the narrator in the biographies of the deceased? In other words, who is constructing the identity of the deceased? Our analysis paid keen attention to this question and

others to help gain better insight into socio-cultural practices that helped construct an identity for the dead in the Akan socio-cultural setting of the deceased.

We appreciate that identity construction almost consistently engages a semiotic process of representation: symbols, narratives, and textual genres (Dowling, 2011). The narrative stands out as being unique as it is foremost used by several researchers in the humanities, especially in the field of linguistics, in their quest to investigate identities in all ramifications. The narrative, then, is situated as a privileged genre for identity. That is, the events and relations among individuals and communities are better exposed and analysed in narratives (Bamberg, 2010; Bruner, 2004; McAdams, 1993). The narrative, thus, situates characters in the context of time and space (McCarthy, 2007). Hinchman and Hinchman's (1997) assertion, cited by Elliott (2005), about narratives being "(stories) in the human sciences (that) should be defined provisionally as discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offer insights about the world and people's experiences of it" (p. 3), resonates well with the conception of identity within the context of this study. Three key features highlighted by this definition of narratives are the core issues of chronology, meaningfulness and sociability. Further explanation of these critical features of narratives standing is that the narrative events are sequentially and temporally ordered that the ordering makes meaning, and that they are meant for specific audiences. These features are confirmed by Riesman (1990) in empirical research that mainly focuses on narrative accounts from interviews of an invalid and analysed with Goffman's constructivist lens.

Reasoning through the above brief exposition about narratives, we see narratives as our sustained recounts that we employ in self-talk to give birth to our self-identity. These recounts could be the prosodic delivery or the conversational narrations, which Bamberg (2007a) refers to as "big" or "small" stories, respectively. The choice for either of the two, according to Bamberg, is not considered the main deal, but the function each performs should instead be closely considered.

In the context of this research, the sustained recounts found in the biographies of the deceased prove reliable enough to explain how identities are constructed for the deceased through the narrator. The focus of this study is how identity roles are played out by the narrators or narrated in the biographies. Recounts are made because something might have happened to challenge a reflection. Reflecting on life and its meaning and some of its extraordinarily challenging situations is deemed not an everyday affair. In analysing the underlying factors for the biographic narrative, some pertinent questions that should preoccupy us come to mind. The biography of the dead, in this prosodic form, is just eulogies or more than that? Do we have identities constructed in them, and if so, are they constructions for the dead (the narrated) or social reflection for the individuals (narrators) who are alive to narrate the stories, or are they the community's narration? Lastly, one may also question why relations settle on this part of the life story of the departed for a recount.

The discursive practice of the discourse community dictates the biography as a funeral text or genre. In the case of this study, the sampled data are from the Akan group, so the social practices of the Akan who were mourning their dead in these biographies dictate the focus of narration. The Akan eulogises the dead; this is a popular aphorism that aptly describes the importance this group accords to the discursive practice of telling the stories of the dead. In this context of mourning the dead, the dead are considered high and revered, as they are now perceived to belong to the spirit world (Geest, 2004). Some of the conceptual systems that reinforce the treating of the dead as a celebrity can be found in statements which have become clichés such as:

-speak no wrong about the dead

-those who die old and natural (i.e. in the age bracket of about seventy and above have) died "well" or "peacefully"(Geest, 2004)

-Those who died "well" should be celebrated. (Geest, 2004).

According to Geest (2004), the dictates to death, as pertains to Akans in Ghana, go beyond the fixed categories such as age and contributions to life. All the inputs to the funeral rites and the write-up in the biography may all be due to the mystery surrounding the destination of the dead. In their grief and also the uncertainty of the destination of the dead coupled with all the societal dictates about handling of the living who are responsible for

the funerals of their dead as a closure to a chapter of their lives deem fitting to use these same funerals to appease or make the dead “happy”, on such a journey. This study’s analysis of the negotiations and constructions of the life of the deceased is a considerable contribution to scholarship identity construction, first for the dead and the living who seek to honour them in Ghana and, by extension, to the West African sub-region.

Theoretical Framework

The theory backing this research is the social constructionist theory. The approach is called “social constructionism” because it aims to account for the ways in which phenomena are socially constructed. Social Science theorists espouse this theory, and the strand employed by this research is one by Frost and Reghr (2013), with the basic tenets:

- We are not born with our identities.
- Identities are not passively assigned and adopted.
- Identities are social constructions.
- Though identities are socially and culturally derived, they are deeply personal.

On the premise of the above tenets, we were able to tease out constructions of identities in discourses as in the narratives. In the case of this research, a thorough search is put on the narratives in the biographies as various aspects of them are studied under the lens of the Labovian six-stage narrative model, which is an aid to narrative analysis, severally used by linguists. It focuses on the structural analysis of narratives by exposing the performative functions played by the different parts of the narrative and their implications.

The model, as presented by Elliott (2005), proposes a fully-formed oral narrative which follows these six stages:

1. Abstract: What is the story about?
2. Orientation: Who, when, where, how?
3. Complicating action: Then what happened?
4. Evaluation: How or why is this interesting?
5. Result / Resolution: What finally happened?
6. Coda: Relevance of the narrative to everyday life.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Fourteen (15) biographies of deceased persons were analysed. They were sampled from over fifty of them, focusing on the deceased who are in “the seventy to the over eighty” age bracket. I picked the biographies from funeral brochures for deceased people. The booklets are public documents which were collected during funerals some relations or I attended. The personalities mourned in the said brochures were mostly Akans (one of the major ethnic groups in Ghana). This choice of data engrossed in one ethnic group in Ghana occurred devoid of any specific purpose by the researcher except for the fact that the researcher inhabited among such a group. Coincidentally, the handy biographies happened to be concentrated on such a group. The same fact that the researcher resided among the group helped to observe their discursive practices with respect to mourning the dead. The data was coded first of all by using letters and figures for the focus characters (i.e. the deceased), exempting names because the consent of the family of the deceased was not sought before using the data. For instance, each biography bore the initials of the deceased’s name and a double-digit figure representing their year of birth. Thus, if a person named Einstein Boakye has a date of birth as 1944, the data will be coded as EB – 44. The 44 is added to avoid the easy coincidence of initials that Esi Bima, whose code EB, could bring. The number of lines for each biography that served as data for this study is also stated in the table. I believe this has

the significance of functioning as an expectation booster, thus telling of how much the reader can expect from a narrator and how much the narrator is ready to reveal about the narrated and in effect what that reveals about the narrator as well. Paragraph groupings were done for further coding on the samples that had all the six-stage narrative features fully or partially represented in them. Lastly, line-by-line colour coding was used to bring out the presence of the linguistic features that signalled identity.

Below is a simple graphic representation of the elements that were dealt with in the coding of the data.

No	Participant Code	No of Lines	No of lines on downturn moments
1	KB – 16	252	0
2	KNG – 23	50	4
3	BB – 39	34	7
4	KEY – 50	138	3
5	PAAA – 40	73	3
6	MEA – 42	790	7
7	JEAM – 44	78	4
8	AAE – 31	90	4
9	MAE – 19	99	0
10	LMA – 53	56	0
11	DAA – 19	83	6
12	EYTF – 35	46	7
13	WNH – 37	24	0
14	TKA – 52	50	2
15	AFP - 35	146	0

RESULTS

At this analysis stage, I first begin by exposing the Labovian six-stage model and pointing out what parts of the narratives fit into the model. Alongside exposition lies how linguistic elements and/or multimodal are employed either as foregrounding or backgrounding techniques to indicate the type of identity being enacted or otherwise and their thematic implications. In this light, foregrounding and backgrounding are done vis-a-vis the linguistic elements that indexed culture and identity. We say a text is foregrounded when the whole or part of it is given prominence by way of highlighting or placing emphasis on some words or syntactic elements. The opposite of foregrounding is backgrounding, and for the author or narrator to choose any is considered an authorial resource that must be looked into (Hucklin).

The Labovian Six-Stage Analysis

First stage -abstract

Here, an abstract is given on who or what the story is about. In the footsteps of Labov's (1972) studies, the titles of the biographies are couched to indicate the who and what of the story. The title comes in phrases such as exposed with one lexical item or a stretch of items (i) with a name, (ii) with a title and a name and others, as in the following:

- (i) Biography
- (ii) Biography of + Full Name; or Biography of the Late + Full Name
- (iii) Biography of the Late
- (iv) Biography of + Title + Full Name or Biography of the Late + Title + Full Name.

Some of the titles that occurred, as indicated in (iii), are Mr., Prof, Dr, Pastor and Nana.

Three of the biographies employed the style described in (i) above, while seven used (ii), one used (iii), and the other four used (iv) above. The choice of any of the four styles did not follow whether the deceased was a top-ranking member of the society, as in a titled personality of the academia or a renowned politician. The absence of the lexical “late” gave removed salience on the deceased in the abstract in that till consulting other features of the story, one may not know who the story is for the living or the dead. Some of the narratives that omitted "late" in the title introduced phrasal appendages which topically ran through the pages of the funeral programmes.

Example:

- 2. Burial, Memorial (and Thanksgiving Service) for...the other elements followed as seen in (i) through (iv) above.

To give salience to the identity of the dead, the abstract is given a multi-modal approach. A picture of the deceased and/or flowers or *adinkra* symbols (used as mourning the dead) is used closely to the title or run-through pages of the programme. The *adinkra* are popular virtual symbols that represent concepts, proverbs and aphorisms among the Akans. Such symbols, which were featured initially only on royal prints for special occasions, are now in widespread usage with global recognition made to grace logos, cloth and furniture, thus emanating their insightful cultural significance. (Owusu, 2019; Danzy, 2009)

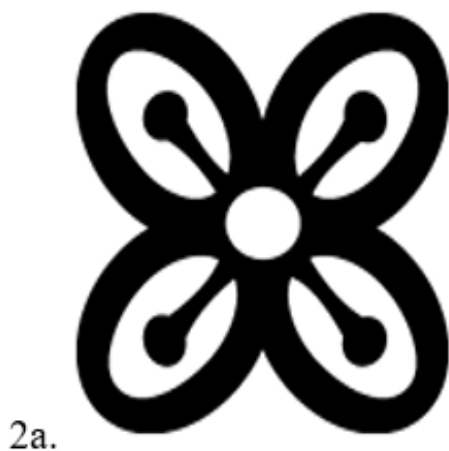
The titles, no matter their styles, are highlighted by underlining, given different colours, more significant, bolder, stylish font, and especially the uppercase.

2a. Biography of the Late (add)

ELISA YAA TIMA FENTENG

2b. Biography (add)

Dr Eduku Amaah



The adinkra symbol in 2a is termed “bese saka,” a bag of cola that symbolises influence, wealth, or abundance. They are used alone or with other images to construct an identity of wealth associated with the narrated and so for the broader family and community. Daffodils are a symbol of lasting love, so when used in this magnitude as a wreath for the deceased, it can be interpreted as an unending or overflow of love between the departed and the remaining loved ones.

In all, right at this onset, based on the styles and various approaches, the reader has a feeling that the deceased in question is upheld by the family, for that matter, the community. In this light, the family, for that matter, the community, that had gone this length in celebrating the dead equally share in the respect given to the dead.

Second Stage - Orientation

At the orientation stage, a brief biographical data of the deceased, orienting the hearer or reader into the summary of the life of the deceased, is given. All these are found in the first few lines, making the first or a few more paragraphs of the biography. Some of the constant elements found are:

1. full name (+ title; preceded) of deceased
2. an alias or nickname²
3. date of birth
4. place of birth
5. parents' name and where they hailed from.

Access to and prowess in education in early years. (a short line stating whether the deceased had and embraced any form or level of education or not)

With the exception of excerpt KEY- 40, which had the date of birth preceding the name, the rest had the name first, usually following the pattern above. An average of eighty (80) words could be found in the orientation.

Example: 3a. our beloved Elisa (Elisa Yaa Tima Finteng), popularly known to relations and friends as Mama Elisa or Aunty Elisa was born on ... and started school... her parents were...

Example: 3b. Joseph Ekow Nduoum was born in (town) ...on April 7, 1932.

Unfortunately, his parents died before he could come to understand events and circumstances playing out around him. He started school at...

Their aspects of the orientation, as delineated by Elliot (2005), were found in most of the data. For instance, narrative clauses that showed the time as narrating events chronologically were mainly employed.

Example: 4a.

His parents *named* him...after his formative years...(he) *enrolled* at ...*completed* his...in...(BB-39).

The paratactic style (strings of phrases with limited use of conjunctions) is highly featured in the orientation of the excerpts. Example

(5a):-"a good husband, family man, a scholar, a lover of music, a man full of humour". (BB-39)

(5b). On the 5th of..., 1940, at Agona Swedru in the Central Region of Ghana, a son was born to... (KEY, '40)

The feel of a hurried conversation is mostly experienced here when, with the use of the paratactic form, several events are concisely recounted; this tells the reader that this is not the main "issue" in this narrative but a forerunner to the bigger, more significant happenings which are yet to be spoken of.

Extract 6a:

Aunty E. was educated at...

She completed in 19...

She worked assiduously...

She distinguished herself ... (AYFA – 35)

Third Stage - Complicating Action

Labov and Waletzky (1997) argue that not all narratives may have all the six stages presented in them; Complicating Action and Evaluative stages are crucial portions of the structure that are much needed in a well-formed narrative. No matter the narrative type, there is a point of telling in someone's life; that note-worthy event or occasion which is the action or complicating action. In the biographic data of deceased persons, we see this stage represented in the note-worthy issue(s) that befell the deceased's life in the form of a career change, marital issue, or life-threatening sickness that was duly managed. It is also seen in reported in a job change or how the deceased found a life partner.

For instance, in MEA-42, after a tall list of awards and accomplishments was given, it is then reported that this character was interviewed and asked how the one she married proposed to her, which she answered thus:

Extract 7a: What makes you think my husband proposed to me?...

I had been friends with this man for a considerable length of time. He was not doing anything about getting married, and, so one day, I just asked him, "When are we getting married?"

His answer was, "O.K., pick a date."

Such a mark of forthrightness in a female in such an area of marriage proposal, which in the Akan community as well as the Ghanaian society and even elsewhere is deemed "a man's thing", is attention-grabbing. Traditionally, the onerous proposal of marriage lies on the man's family, which takes the proposal to the woman's family (Ayertey, 2009; Opoku-Adjei, 2018). Amidst all the claims of changes to existing marriage regimes and practices the world over, the marriage delivery of the proposal has seen little to no change. Research into attitudes towards marriage traditions and gender role ideology confirms that both men and women prefer to hold on to traditional marriage preferences, especially with regard to proposals (Robnett & Leaper, 2012; Opoku-Adjei, 2018).

It is in light of this that we find the foregrounding of MEA - 42's style of proposal in this data as indexing the identity of an achiever, a go-getter, and a pacesetter who could not be pushed into stereotypes.

In this complicating action stage, the narrator is economical on the adverse events or occurrences that were not resolved in the life of the deceased. Life-threatening illnesses that might have led to bed confinement, fatal accidents, and sour or torn-apart relations are just alluded to or not exposed at all. From the data, we see that these life challenges and even the sicknesses leading to death have limited mention of such. For instance, eight out of the entire data mention any downturn moments in the form of sickness, hospitalization, and others. Out of these eight biographies, minimal line spaces are accorded to the reporting of these negative turns in the narrations. For example, from more than a-seven-hundred lines of life narration, only about seven lines reported about a sickness in the life of the deceased which left her without speech or use of her limbs. On average, three and a half lines are devoted to the life struggles of the deceased; that is when the negative is chosen to be reported on. Most of the time, we find a quick turn to bring in the positive, even in the reporting of the downturn, in these biographies. Extract 8a:

During the early part of 2004, Auntie fell in and was hospitalized...she was discharged ... she reported to hospital from time to time ...in ...this year, her condition deteriorated... and she **responded to a higher calling from above... peacefully...**

Extract 8b:

...even when she was sick and bedridden, **she played the role of family advisor till her last breath...**

Extract 8c:

The countdown started on your 90th birthday ... **you personally thanked all of us ... you sang a hymn ... you committed your soul into the hands**

His (your maker's) ...

Forth Stage – Evaluation

Evaluation is the point of telling in the story. It is the answer to the “and so what?” question in narrativity. By the Labovian narrative structure, evaluation is characteristically placed between the action and resolution in a well-formed narrative, and it is believed that in that position, it is a platform for elements of tension and suspense (Elliott, 2005). In some forms of narratives, though, evaluative clauses can be found at any stage of the narrative's “reason d’etre” of narrations; they create different effects due to the different placements they receive. It is worth noting that evaluation can be seen as judgement directed at not only the core of narration but also actions and characters as well. Tannen (1980), cited by Elliott (2005), corroborates this by illustrating incidents that subtly report downturn moments in narration at the evaluation stage. At this stage, in our data, life-threatening illnesses that might have led to bed confinement, fatal accidents, and sour or torn-apart relations are just alluded to or not exposed at all. Elliott further suggests that lexical choices (i.e. the use of specific words) within the components of the narrative are a clear example of how implicit evaluation is done.

It could be argued that the very telling of a narrative represents an evaluative act. It suggests that certain events and decisions are reportable by virtue of their significance or their unusual or unexpected qualities (Elliott, 2005, p. 9).

This meets the trend for this project pleasantly in that the biography of the deceased, as handled in this socio-cultural setting of the Akan, generally Ghana, is one of the major grounds for eulogizing the dead. Eulogizing the dead is “a sensemaking function of identity construction – both for the deceased and for the survivors” (Davis et al., 2016, p1). This should explain why negative events in the past life of the dead are almost left out in the narratives (as seen in the complicating action); by their living relations. In the data, the reports on the deceased's downturn moments in life were few, and these were done briefly, thus exposing a backgrounding of such moments, and the evaluations raised on them foregrounded the positive in the ‘seemingly’ negative. The reason why “what happened, happened” is left for the reader to judge with only a few positive lexical baits thrown out, to possibly lead the reader to only positive conclusions on the reported events. At this evaluation stage in the narratives, I observe that it is an avenue created to virtually celebrate the dead with no room for evaluating the negative. Every possible avenue to eulogize the dead at this stage is not spared. In this regard, evaluative elements can be found in most of the narrative stages, especially abounding more from the second to the penultimate stages; from personal to communal assistance received from the deceased to personal and group awards in and outside professional life are spelt out in flowery language. One linguistic strategy foremost used to combine the narrator and the narrated is the use of indexicals. Either the inclusive “we” or lexical items to indicate the participation of essential roles family played in the life of the narrated, including giving of support, is subtly brought out here.

Stage Five - Resolution

The result or resolution portion in the narration of the story of the deceased seems to say, “the story is over”. This stage in the conversational narrative or even the prosodic narrative for the living could be a pointer towards an oncoming event or an indication of a cyclic recurrence in a person's life. The resolution segment in the biographical narratives of the deceased brings total closure instead. It is like putting in a nutshell all that has happened in a person's life till his death and making a concluding statement to it all. In this case, the death of the character in question is the ultimate. In other words, it marks the end of the construction of identity, both for the

dead and the living. Here again, the cause of death and the events leading to death are not usually raised. Protracted illnesses are not conspicuously mentioned either. Nevertheless, what caused the death is briefly mentioned with a concessionary statement to a positive lookout immediately following.

9a. ill health will(would) not allow him to accomplish all his dreams of moving back home...but was at peace through and through... (PAAA – 40)

9b. Her belief in God in her last days was remarkable ... Instead of panic... she uttered words of faith, and even when speech eluded her, she managed to say “I” am passing through; I know Jesus will walk me through it all.

(MEA-42)

At this point, we may have to remind ourselves that the subjects of our data are deceased and are considered well-lived because they were aged beyond seventy (70) years (Van der Geest 2004 and Opoku-Adjei 2018). The lesser or total absence of ill-health in these aged is considered more commendable to their old age and death.

Death in the biographies is reported to take place almost always at the hospital, or the venue is not reported at all. Example: Extract 10:

10a. "He became ill for a while in his last days and died peacefully at the Hospital." (KNG-23)

10b. "He became sick for some time, and on that fateful day Monday---, he was rushed to Korle-Bu where he was pronounced dead on arrival. (BB-39)

10c. The countdown started on your 90th birthday...you told us a dream ...this was about three days before her admission at Korle Bu and a week later her death.

(DAA – 19)

In of the data, eight of them give no venue of death (JEAM-44, MEA-42, PAAA-40, KEY-40), while with the remaining ones, three do not say anything about place, time, or reason of death (KB-16, PA – 35, MEA - 19). This trend gives the assumption that all was well with the deceased, who were full of days before passing on, a reflection of what Van der Geest (2004) considers dying peacefully in the said setting.

Stage Six - Coda

The coda, per the Labovian prescription, ends the narrative structure by returning the narrative perspective (past) to the present. Such a change can be seen in the use of statements that shift the focus from the past life of the deceased to those who survived him or her. Examples of such statements are found in these extracts:

11a. Auntie ... left behind a brother and two sisters, three sons and a daughter, twenty grandchildren and sixteen great-grandchildren...

11b. ... is survived by biological children, grandchildren, foster children, as well as many mentees...

11c. She left behind a husband, six children, eighteen grandchildren a host of relations, friends, and well-wishers to mourn her.

We can observe that whereas extracts 11a and 11c mention a specific number of kith and kin, Extract 11b does not. However, all the extracts add different details by mentioning extended family groups (siblings – 11a; mentees – 11b; host of relations ... and well-wishers) they deem fit or are most acceptable to them. Such a focus spills out value differences for specific people, and that in itself is a case for constructing an identity for family inclusion. Going beyond the exposure of the surviving family, the coda is expressed in the issuance of final or universal statements, quotations from the bible, stanzas or lines from hymns or songs, and popular sayings. Examples of what is found in our data are presented below:

12a. When the day of toil is done When the race of life is run Father, grant thy weary one Rest forever more
(song – PA – 35)

12b We ... together say, “when this corruptible has put on incorruptible, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written “death is swallowed up in Victory” ...

The popular ending to most of the biography set is the short ending fare well message; “Fare thee well”. Rest in peace”. Where some of our biographies do not have them at all, those who have them add different twists to them in styles as below:

13a. Rest in perfect, **Uncle...**

13b. May **her soul** rest in peace...

13c. **Sister**, rest in the **bosom of Abraham** till we meet again

Another interesting twist is that most of the data have this final statement of “rest in peace” translated into Akan or a significant language the specific family associates with. Examples are seen below:

14a. Auntie, Damirifa due! (MEA- 19)

14b. Maa, Da yie!

Maa. May God keep you till we meet again. (EYTF – 35)

These are universal statements bringing the reader to the present state of affairs, which also spells finality to the mortal state of man, and it all ends in this final moment of separation. A separation that the deceased inter into rest not into doom but to await an expected reunion with loved ones.

Thematic Concerns

This second part of the analysis of the data focuses on investigating the several themes that run through the stories. Some of the prominent ones we will discuss here are mobility/affability, career/industry, marital relation, and focus on early life. The position of Bamberg et al. (2010) on the concept of discourse entailment somewhat resonates with that of earlier discourse theorists such as Foucault and Habermas. To them, it is of necessity that discourse, among others, entails what is being talked about in terms of themes, topics, and content in a culturally established setting where cultural stock is used in line with the focus of the broader social and institutional conditions that hold feasible. It is then, through the cultural lens, that these themes were identified and analysed. It is in light of such a position of discourse that the few themes I analyse in the data are based on pegging personal identity to social identity.

The first theme, mobility, goes with the experience of travelling, which is expressed in the context of a highly mobile life. The prominence of some of the deceased is shown by how often and far they travelled in their lives. Their industrious and busy nature was foregrounded, especially when traveling was of international direction. These personalities were looked on as “been-to”; they tasted life outside their communities and were more enlightened and vested in knowledge.

Extract 15:

15a. Auntie together wither her cousins ...began trading between Accra and abroad...AAE – 31

15b. She was privileged to travel to several countries abroad for studies, conferences and as a government representation on many occasions...MEA – 42

The narrated were portrayed as people endowed to help other members of their families. Those who (with reference to the deceased) chose to deliver such expectations in the form of care for close or distant relations in

the form of scholarship for education, setting up in trade, accommodation, and even hosting such relations, friends, and close or distant members of the community with food and others were the more praised. Out of the fifteen data sets being dealt with, this theme runs through thirteen of them (KB - 16, KNG - 23, KEY - 40, PAAA - 40, MEA - 42, and JEAM - 44, LMA - 53, EYTF - 35, AAE - 31, BA - 35, MAE - 19, DAA - 19). The immeasurable praises doled on the deceased showed the salience given the performance of travelling, acquiring some wealth, being benevolent in relations, and more. Such acceptability of the traits as mentioned earlier in a relation is foregrounded in most of the biographies thus:

Extract 16a. was like the biblical Joseph, who was separated from his siblings and sent to Egypt, only to become the big tree under whose shade the rest of her siblings siblings and family came to seek shelter ... (AAE – 31)

16b. she domiciled in different places due to work... she was a homely person ... exhibited affection for all without discrimination and expressed tender love for people in need ... (EYTF – 35)

Secondly, occupational and social roles that the deceased played were foregrounded in constructing their identities with such themes. The thirteen data sets are not spared in this area, but the ones leading in prominence are MEA-42 and KB-16, which had twelve and fourteen-page-length spelt-out roles, respectively, to project the many times and far places the deceased travelled to, in terms of work and for diverse social reasons. The other biographies had an average of thirty lines on these roles. Considering how these two are featured in all the data, with so much attention shown in the much space given, this theme is an indication of the thematic prominence of the occupational and social roles played in the lives of the deceased and also to the broader community. For instance, in both MEA-42 and KB-16, one could find academic or political achievements, higher scholarships, chairmanship, and membership on several boards and committees, as some of the respective roles were said to have been played by the two deceased persons. The fact here is that those two personalities have had several academic laurels and played diverse social and academic roles in their societies. Their families saw the funeral broacher as the space to tout the achievements of their departed. Though in the other biographies, achievements were not sounded as compared to the first two, they also had fair representations of the roles the deceased played even when they were not in the academic circles as in the MEA-42 and KB-19 ones. This is an indication that “Work is work” and that society respects the one who works and celebrates the result or evidence of work, which is seen as success. The men and women narrated in the data are celebrated for their successes, their educational backgrounds notwithstanding.

The last of the themes I will touch on in this study is that of marital relationships. Family relations beyond marital and child care received a great deal of attention alongside the development of this theme. Such attention showed the salience of such an identity constructed for the deceased. In the biographies, marital relations for the deceased were exposed and touted with respect. Working with biographies of persons set in the older age bracket (seventy and above), it is observed that respect is more gained for the ones who had had longer and more warm relations with their spouses. Such agency is exhibited in the praise-filled descriptions or flowery language used in reporting spousal and other relations.

Extract: 17a. He met and married his lovely wife...these two love birds showed the epitome of exemplary love and... (TKA – 52)

17b. no wonder she achieved all these heights in life ... with this supportive and understanding husband by her... (MEA – 42)

A twist to the construction of the marital identity alongside the love of family, in general, is seen in the total silence on the spousal role whenever there is a hitch in the marriage relation for a deeper focus on offspring and other relationships. In some of the data, this development is seen in the portrayal of the closeness and depth of the relations among both biological and other relations. The good standing that the offspring from these have had in society was also elaborated. This space more often featured picture galleries showcasing the deceased with different family members in diverse events or celebrations alongside the written accounts. Either way, such reportage spelt the significance such a marital role played in the life of both the narrated and the narrator.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Data for this study was analysed by first driving it under the lens of the Labovian six-stage narrative structure. The study aimed to find out how such prosodic narratives of bereavement come out under the Labovian lens as they do under other forms of prosodic as well as other conversational narratives. Also, going beyond how these narratives played under the Labovian lens, the study aimed to investigate how identity is constructed for the narrated and, consequently, the narrator. Lastly, the study looked at the themes under which the identified identities were constructed.

From the data, it was found that the application of Labov's six-stage narrative as the model for the analysis could not be sustained through each of the stages of the biographical narratives in a straightjacket form. First, even though most of the narrative stages, as proposed in the Labovian studies, could be found in their expected order, the evaluation in the present data was seen interspersed in the complicating action stage and also found in the other stages, such as orientation and result stages. In this light, I could not find evaluation clauses grouping on their own after the action stage alone per the specification of the Labovian model; one would invariably find some in the other stages. Another unique finding is that the Complicating Action stage highlights noteworthy events like career and marital changes or life-threatening sicknesses managed by the deceased. The adversity of these cases in such a reportage is avoided, especially the unresolved adverse events or illnesses leading to death. For instance, eight data points mention downturn moments (sickness, hospitalization), while seven of them have no report on that. No matter the length or number of lines for the C.A., only an average of 3.5 (three and a half) lines tell about the downturn moments. An example is found in data MEA – 42, which has 790 lines with close to 700 lines reporting on various actions and achievements, yet the narrative assigns only about 7 (seven) lines to tell on sickness, which could leave the deceased speechless and immobile. In all, the biographies quickly shift to the positive even when reporting downturns. The evaluation of the deceased's life focuses on their resilience and ability to overcome challenges. The biographies conclude with a positive note, emphasising the deceased's impact on others and their lasting legacy.

The themes that ran through the narratives were found to concentrate on the positives of the deceased; for example, two of the themes are achievements and rewards. It was not too difficult to infer that the narrator(s), being an in-group person(s), readily saw himself or herself through the stories being narrated. So identity was being negotiated for both the narrator and the narrated in these stories. From the Foucauldian perspective, it is assumed that engagement in discursive communal practices forms (speaking) subjects and their world. From this angle, the subject is the one who is conscious; that is, the one who experiences, feels and thinks. Thus, in the world of the narrator, he or she is doing the in-group service, obviously not the outside existing patterns that can be found in their culture. In other words, the choice of how to do what is done is created by the discursive practices of the specific cultural group or society in which they engage (Foucault, 1997).

CONCLUSION

Narratives are not just stories but a discursive medium for constructing identity. Narratives, as in biographies and, more especially, the biographies of deceased persons, have a narrator negotiating identity for the deceased, who is an absent character yet lives through the narrator. As a result, the events chosen to relate to are the narrator's reflections on their deceased loved one's life in line with the expectations of society. The meaning of these events to the narrator as well as to the larger community is reinforced as the latter recounts them. In doing this, the identity then constructed for the deceased is a reflection of the narrator's self and also a construction of the community whose discursive practices are being upheld. This study adds to the extant literature on using narrative discourse to construct identity and, more so, the identity of the deceased as constructed in their biographies.

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