Death of a Seamstress

by Terrie Schweitzer

"Stop crying," Stella chides me as we leave the house.

"I'm sorry. You send me home if you need to," I tell her. I have a feeling that Esther, her sister, is already uncomfortable about taking me along. Today we are burying their sister-in-law, and have just paid our respects at their bereaved brother's house.

We go to the mother's house. We enter the compound and they take me to the porch where the body has been laid out under a mosquito net. I don't recognize the woman, but I can't see her face well through the green netting.

At the sight of the body, Stella and Esther begin calling out and sobbing. "Ai-yay, ai-yay, ai-yay!" they cry. No one says to quit crying now. Not that it would help.

Yesterday, the doctor in Kumasi said she had bleeding in the brain, that she must have been in an accident, though she denied anything of the sort. Like most deaths here, there are more questions than answers. She leaves behind a toddler and a 6-month-old. She was just in her twenties.

Esther takes me to the side of the compound and makes me sit in a plastic chair. Most of the other women sit on benches lining the inner perimeter of the compound. Many are weeping, sometimes covering their faces with the black and red cloths draped over their shoulders. Sometimes one cries out with particular grief, either sitting in place or walking around the compound. I wish I understood more Nafaanra, even though I know the words would break my heart.

The men bring in the casket, a plastic white, blue and gold affair with painted plastic panels. The keening intensifies when the women see it.

"Why have you left us? Can't you see we are here working? Won't you come back and work with us?"

The men put it on the other side of the compound and leave.

A women's choir from the church enters, singing and playing a small drum and other percussion instruments. While they are singing, the brass band starts up their own music outside. Other women pull a sewing table into the compound, and set up three sewing machines. Someone brings small pieces of fabric. It is a cacophony as women enter, women move about and wail, and women sew.

At first I think they are going to sew some kind of shroud. Instead they skillfully fashion small blouses out of blue silk and a green print. The dead woman was a seamstress, and this is how her co-workers honor her. While they are sewing, the woman who owns the tailoring shop begins crying out as she walks around the table where the others are working. She gestures from the body to the women who are sewing, and calls out. I don't understand the words, but it feels like she is addressing her friend who has died. "Why have you left us? Can't you see we are here working? Won't you come back and work with us?"

The women finish the small garments and hold them up for a photographer.

Other women pull a large piece of fabric over the porch where the body lies and hold it in place. The casket is brought over. Women transfer the body into the casket behind the curtain. Yet more people come into the compound and mill about. Another group is singing and the brass band outside is repeating the one dirge they seem to know. It is crowded and chaotic. It smells of grief, of the pungent odor of children playing hard outside all day in the heat and the dirt.

Men come and lift the casket; she is carried to the church on their shoulders as the brass band follows, along with the rest of us, under the bright African sun. After the church service, we process through town to the cemetery, and the casket is lowered into the earth.

In the coming months I will attend other funerals. I can't help but compare them to the funerals of my own culture. In America, we gather in honor of the departed: they have already gone somewhere else. And we remove ourselves from the experience in many ways, making grief seem to be only a condition of the mind. But here, we physically participate in each person's final rite of passage. The deceased are still very much with us. Though each one is a little different, the Nafara funeral is always passionate, visceral and corporeal. The thread of the individual is woven into the fabric of community, and tenderly the community sees each member to the other side.

Terrie Schweitzer (Ghana 2011-13) is a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ghana, working with cashew farming families.