

# **Traditional Funeral Rites: A Useful Ancient Tradition or a Threat to our Food Security? A Case of the Kandiga Community of Ghana**

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## **Abstract**

Food insecurity is a major concern to individuals, corporate entities and the society at large. This concern has resulted in much efforts being put in place to overcome food insecurity. Despite the efforts being made, the people of Kandiga community still continue to live in an era where their traditional beliefs and values dictate to them how and why funerals should be performed without considering the consequences these funerals will pose on food security. This called for the assessment of whether a traditional funeral rite is a useful tradition or a threat to food security.

Methodologically, non-probability sampling was used to select the category of respondents. Under this sampling, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to obtain the respondents. Qualitative data was primarily gathered from these respondents using interview guide, focus group discussion, observation, recording and transcribing. Also, secondary data was obtained through reviewing of various literatures such as journals, articles, reports, text books and the internet.

The findings indicated that households spent deficit on traditional funeral rites thereby creating food insecurity in Kandiga community. Unfortunately, any support provided by development agencies end up being used by the people to perform their ancient traditional funeral rites creating a cycle of threat to their food security.

**Key words:** Food security, Funeral rites, Culture, Tradition, Ancient

## **1.0 Introduction**

Societies all over the world have distinct cultural identities. Funeral rite is one of such cultural identities that specifies how a particular group of people honor the dead. According to Ofori (2012), funerals are traditional rites that date back to creation. He added that many cultures across the world have made funeral rites as part of the rites of passage performed to usher dead people into the spiritual world.

Michelle (2010) came out with the meaning of funeral rites as customs and rituals, often religious in nature, which commemorates the end of a life. He added that funeral services are often held for members of communities to allow for the viewing of the body and mourning. In addition, post-funeral rites are important in several cultures and religions to honour the dead. It is worth noting that funeral rite is an important aspect of Culture in every society. As defined by Byaruhanga & Opium (2008; p1),

*“Culture refers to the roles, uses, position and symbolism of individuals, ideas and objects such as food, in all aspects of a society; including beliefs, values, norms, taboos, institutions, language, rituals and art”.*

According to Byaruhanga & Opium (2008; p 2), food is regarded first and foremost as a necessity to support physical activity, survival, nutrition and health of the people. However, food also plays a major secondary role in socio-cultural activities and to a large extent defines ethnic identity (Byaruhanga & Opium, 2008; p 2).

Traditional funeral rites reflect values and beliefs held by people of the study community for periods often spanning generations (Fact Sheet, 2001 & Nabila, 2009). Every social group in the world has specific cultural practices and beliefs (Fact Sheet, 2001 & Nabila, 2009), some of which are beneficial while others have direct or indirect negative effects on the practitioners or a vulnerable group of individuals. Traditional funeral rite is among the cultural practices that has been passed on from generation to generation and are rooted in their belief systems. According to Moyo (2013)

*“Death, among Africans, has remained an enigma that burial rituals and rites practiced many years ago have resisted the wear and tear of both time and cross-cultural influences”.*

The study community is no exception to this resistance.

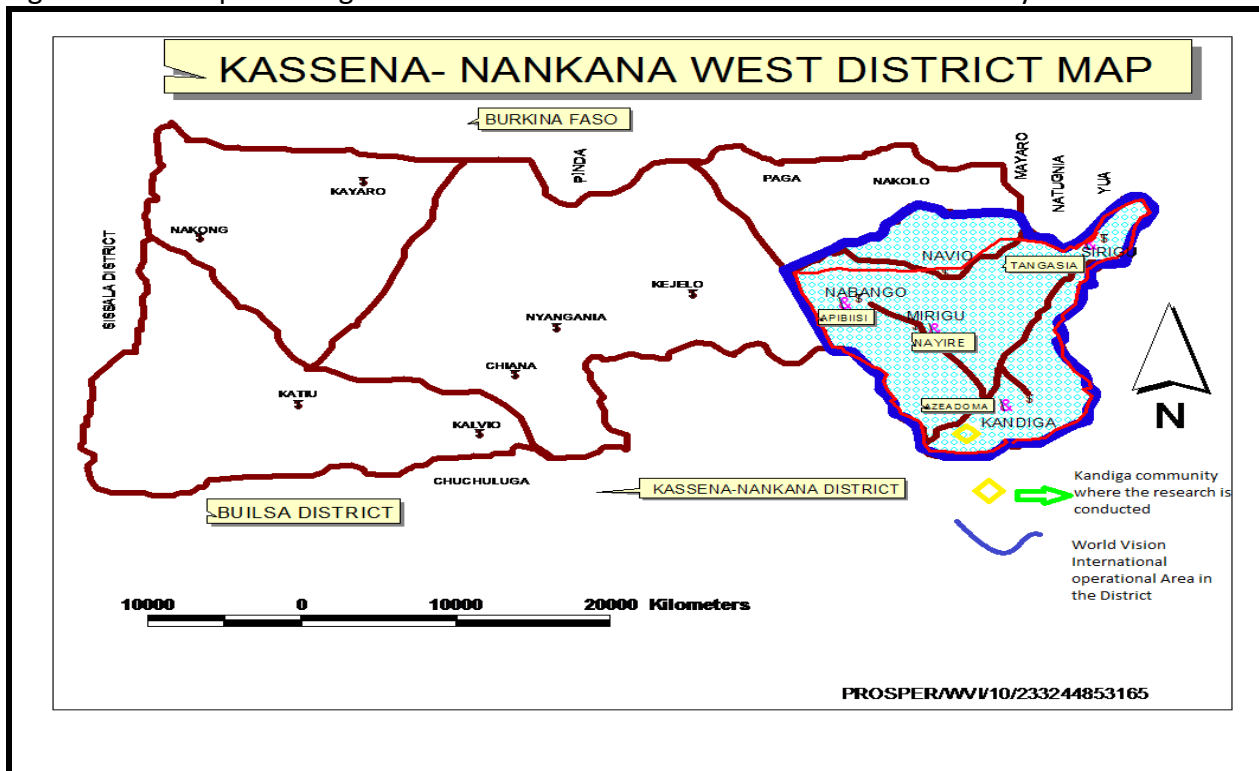
## **2.0 Brief Description of the Study Area**

This study covered a community called Kandiga in the Kassena-Nankana West District which lies within the Guinea Savannah woodlands. The district falls approximately between latitude 10.79° north and longitude 01.10° west (World Vision Ghana, 2009). It is one of the thirteen districts in the Upper East Region of the Republic of Ghana with Paga as its capital.

The District has a total land area of about 1,004 km<sup>2</sup>. The District shares boundaries to the North with Burkina Faso, to the East with Bongo District and Bolgatanga Municipality, to the West with the Kassena-Nankana District and to the South with West Mamprusi District (World Vision Ghana, 2008)

The district has a total population of 70,667 representing 6.8 percent of the population of Upper East Region (GSS, 2010: p18). With an area of 872.8 square kilometres, the district has a population density of 81 persons per square kilometre (GSS 2010: p18). The proportion of the female population (50.8%) in the district is slightly higher than that of males (49.2%). The age category with the highest population is 5-9 years constituting 6.9 percent of the total district population (GSS, 2010: p18). Kandiga community has ten sub communities with a population of 9143 made up of 4120 men and 5023 women (Population and Housing Census 2000 cited in World Vision Ghana, 2008).

Figure 1.1: A Map Showing the Kassena Nankana West District where the study area is found.



Source: World Vision Ghana (2008)

### 2.1.1 Economy

According to GSS (2010: p5), agriculture is the dominant economic activity in the district. The sector employs over 68.7% of the people. Male farmers' population stands at 33,307 representing 48.4% and female farmers stands at 35,509 representing 51.6% (GSS, 2010: p5). From this statistics, it is clear that women labour more than men but their labour is sometimes used to perform traditional funeral rites. The major crops grown are millet, sorghum, rice, groundnuts, leafy vegetables, cowpea, bambara beans, okro, cotton, tomatoes and onion (GSS, 2010: p5). Livestock reared in the district include cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, guinea fowls, fowls and other domestic animals like donkeys (GSS, 2010: p5).

Farm sizes are quite small and yields are very low as compared to other parts of the country due partly to poor soils and unreliable rainfall (GSS, 2010: p5). There are few dams and dugouts which are being used for dry season farming. This has implications for food insecurity (GSS, 2010: p5). The food insecurity is further compounded when households used the poor yields to perform funeral rites.

With regard to Kandiga community, about 80% of the people are farmers while the remaining percent constitute business men and women as well as government workers.

During agricultural off-season period, those farmers without alternative sources of income have no option than to migrate to the southern part of Ghana for greener pastures (World Vision Ghana, 2008).

### **2.1.2 Household size of the study district.**

The district has a total household population of 69,967 with 9,792 being urban and 60,173 being rural (GSS, 2010: p27). The table further indicates that there are a total of 12,813 households with 15.4 per cent in urban areas and 84.6 per cent in rural areas (GSS, 2010: p27). Again, the average household size in the rural areas is 5.5 which are slightly higher than the average household size in urban areas which is also 5.0 (GSS, 2010: p27).

The implication is that, rural households in the Kassena Nankana West District has more dependents than that of the urban setting yet the rural folks spend a greater proportion of their farm produce on funerals at the expenses of feeding the family. This has led to food insecurity in the district especially where the study is conducted.

### **2.1.3 Topography**

Two main types of soil are present within the district are the Savannah ochrosols and groundwater laterite (Ghana Districts, 2007). As part of the discovery, Ghana Districts, 2007 said the northern and eastern parts of the district are covered by the Savannah ochrosols, while the rest of the district has groundwater laterite. MOFA (2011) further explained that the Savannah ochrosols are porous, well drained, loamy and mildly acidic and interspersed with patches of black or dark-grey clay soils. This soil type is suitable for cultivation of various crops and hence accounts for the arable land sites including most parts of the Tono Irrigation Project sites where both wet and dry season farming activities are concentrated (World Vision Ghana, 2008 & Ghana Districts, 2007).

The groundwater laterite is developed mainly over shale and granite and covers approximately 60 per cent of the District's land area. Due to the underlying rock type (granite), they become waterlogged during the rainy season and dry out during the dry season, thus causing cemented layers of iron-stone (hard pan), which makes cultivation difficult (World Vision Ghana, 2008 & Ghana Districts, 2007).

## **3. 0 Data and Methods**

This study used a case study design to obtain information on how traditional funeral rites of Kandiga community affect food security. This study used a qualitative research strategy to find

answers to the research questions raised. This choice was influenced by the research interest to “see through the eyes of the people being studied” and to access their local knowledge on the effects and mitigation responses (Bryman, 2008:285) cited in (Bempah, 2011) regarding traditional funeral rites. According to Yin, (2003), cited in Bempah, (2011), a case study is particularly good for examining the “why” “how” and “what” questions which are typical to this study.

The population of this study was carefully selected and treated as participants. Considering the qualitative nature of this research, the research has selected four(4) traditional/opinion leaders, three (3) head of the Development Agencies, thirty-six (36) heads of households who have completed all the stages of traditional funeral rites of their deceased relatives, some two (2) knowledgeable women leaders and three (3) chief “undertakers” to form part of the research respondents. In all the total population for the study were forty-eight (48) participants.

Apart from the above it was realized that the knowledge on traditional funeral rites in the study area is not evenly distributed among the population. It therefore necessitated the use of non-probability sampling to get the rightful respondents. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used under the non-probability sampling to obtain the sample population. Some of the respondents were specifically predefined groups that the research sought to purposely obtain answers from hence the need to use purposive sampling techniques. However, knowledge about where to locate the rightful respondents such as the chief “undertakers” was limited and so the research also adopted snowball sampling techniques to identify one (1) of the chief “undertakers” and he recommended two other knowledgeable colleagues to participate in the interview.

The research was also interested in interacting with the respondents to get their opinion about the implications of traditional funeral rites on household food security. This necessitated the selection of qualitative research to gather primary data. This strategy was more interactive and had enabled this study to get an in-depth knowledge on the topic. As explained by Bryman (2008: p26) cited in Bempah (2011), a qualitative strategy is preferred when a researcher wants to get the opinions of a social group because it’s “more sensitive to how participants interpret their social world”. In this regard, this study wanted to know from individuals their opinion on traditional funeral rite and its impact on household food security. Several qualitative tools were used to collect the both primary and secondary data. These include observation, analyzing text and documents, semi-structured interviews, recording and transcribing (Silverman, 2001: p 11) and Focus Group Discussions.

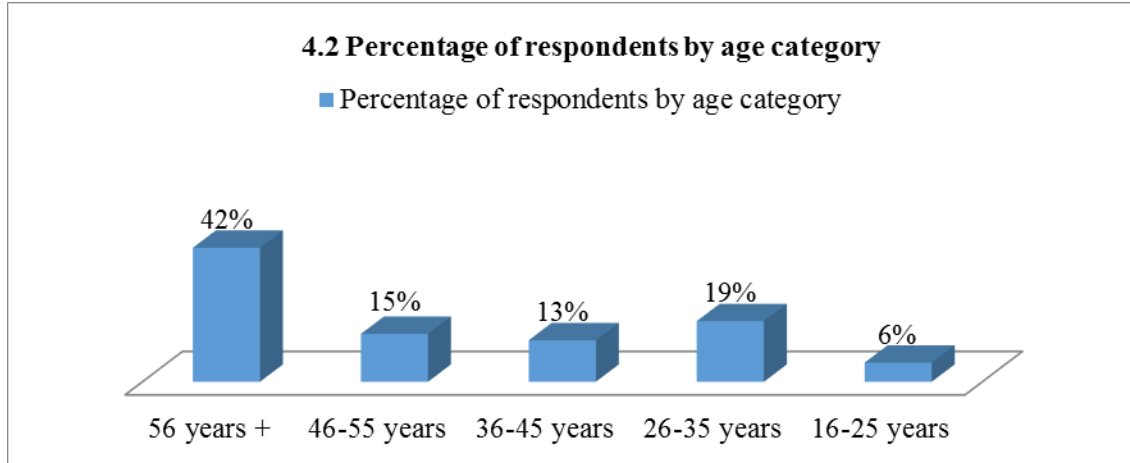
## **4.0 Results and Discussions**

### **4.1 Demographic Characteristics**

This section focused on demographic characteristics each respondent. These basically included the age category, marital status and the educational level.

**4.1.1. Age**

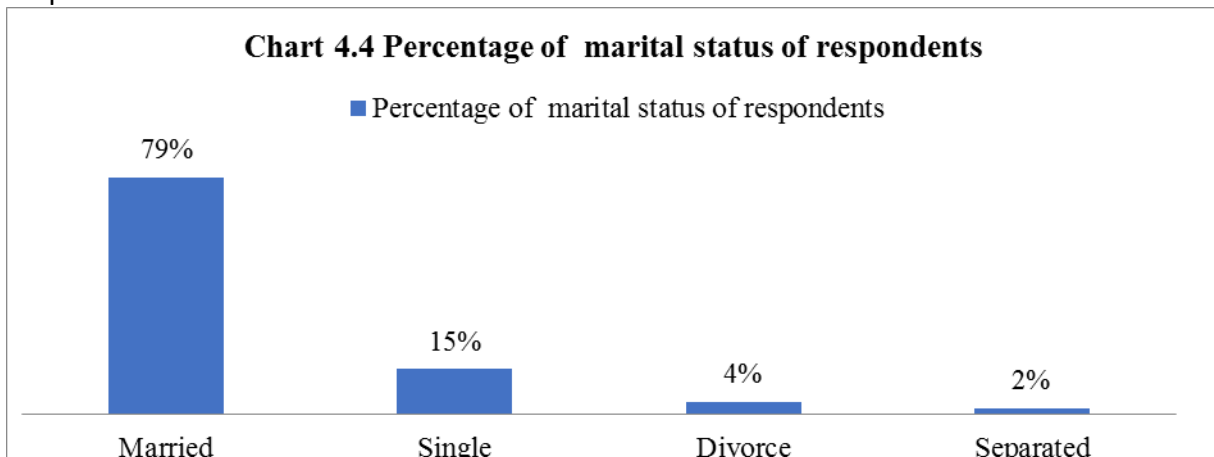
In terms of age, 42% of the respondents aged 56years plus. 15% and 13% of the respondents are between the ages of 46-55 years and 36-45 years respectively. 6% and 19% respondents aged 16-25 years and 26-35 years respectively. This is represented on Chart 4.2 below.



Source: Fieldwork, (2014)

**4.1.2. Marital Status**

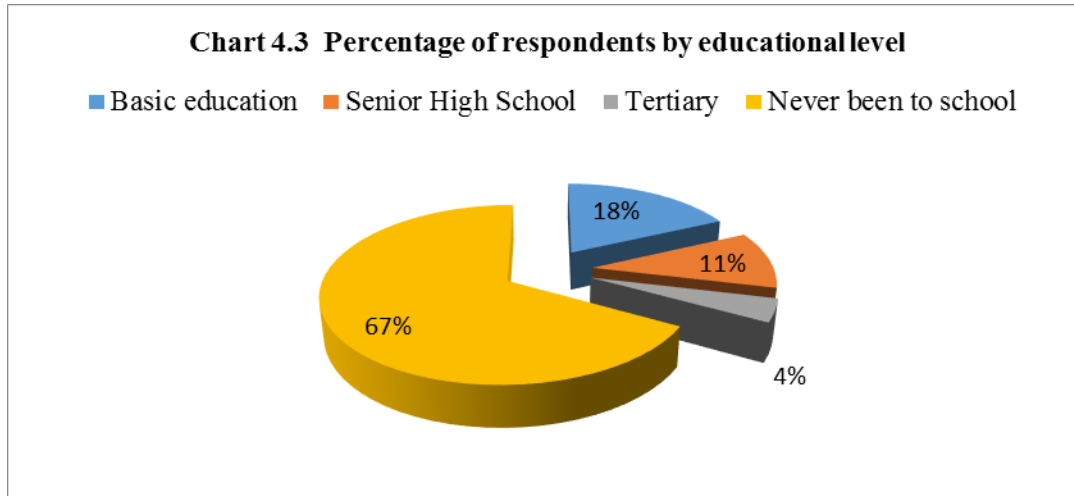
Apart from the above, the marital status of the respondents was also recorded. 79% respondents are married, 4% of them are divorced, 15% are single and 2% of the respondent has separated. Chart 4.4 below also represents the clear information on the marital status of the respondents.



Source: Fieldwork, (2014)

#### 4.1.4. Educational Levels

With regards to the level of education of the respondents, 18% of the respondents have attended basic education and 4% of the respondents have attained tertiary education. Also, 11% of the respondents had completed Senior High School and 67 % of respondents had never been to school.



Source: Fieldwork, (2014)

The performance of traditional funeral rites in the Kandiga community could therefore to be attributed to the high level of illiteracy rate in the community.

#### 4.2. Usefulness of traditional funeral rites in Kandiga community.

Among the people of the study community especially the aged category, they view traditional funeral rites as a fare well to the dead. They believe that during the life of the deceased, all the possessions that he or she had while alive should not be denied when he or she is dead. Hence the need to slaughter animals such as goats, fowls, sheep and cows among others all in the name of goodbye to the deceased. They consider traditional funeral rites as a cultural practice that when completely performed will erase public teasing, ridicule, and of course serve as a good bye to the dead.

Also, it is a belief by the people of Kandiga community that the deceased is qualified to be erected as a god to protect the household and the whole family when the deceased funeral rite is duly performed.

The findings also indicated that after successful performance of funeral rites of the deceased, the “ghost” will depart from the living and join the ancestral world thereby offering peace and good health to the family. The performance of the deceased funeral rites also serve as peace making which will not provoke the deceased to cause more deaths in the family.



### **4.3. Threat of traditional funeral rites on food security**

Findings have indicated that traditional funeral rites in the study community serve as a serious threat to household food security. It is worth noting that traditional funeral rites in Kandiga community do not attract donations which will economically support the deceased household during and after the funeral rites. This threat has been overlooked over the years. The findings indicated fifteen stages/processes involved in traditional funeral rites and each of these stages is associated with excessive use of resources. During the FGD, it was realized that the people are now feeling the negative impact of these rituals on their lives. It was realized that there is very little economic gain from the traditional funeral rites and this shows how the traditional funeral rites brings about food insecurity among households and their relatives who happen to form part of the funeral expenses. Participants of the FGD were of the view that some of the stages/processes were unnecessary and should be cut-off.

Traditional funeral rites affect labour distribution and resources. This is because after the funeral rites, the affected households have to either travel or be engaged on rich person's farms to get food for their family. This has negative connotation on their own farms because they will have less time to spend on their own farm lands so as to get enough harvest for the household.

The threat of traditional funeral rites continues to expand its negative tentacles on education which is a long term measure of overcoming household food insecurity among households in Kandiga community. As a result of traditional funeral rites, children education is neglected since families are unable to raise enough money to take the children to school. Consequently, there is massive school dropout in the study community.

The research has also revealed that traditional funeral rites serve as a platform where traditionalists exercise their gods' powers on their opponents. Most of these individuals who are poisoned by the powers of the gods during the funeral rites especially war dance may end up dying or contracting prolonged poor health conditions. In either of these two conditions, these individuals cannot provide for the family resulting in household food insecurity.

Aside the above, traditional funeral rites bring poverty to the affected households and as a result they have to engage in harvesting of trees for sale as firewood which has an effect on rainfall patterns. Soil becomes hollow and so infertile as a result of the harvesting of trees for sale as fire wood. Poultry and livestock contribute a lot to soil fertility and the more a household has livestock and poultry in the fence yard the more the household gets organic manure to apply on the farms. Since funeral rites claim lots of these animals, it takes a longer period for the household to accumulate these livestock and poultry to gain this special benefit. Thus, the amount of food required to perform the funeral rites is so much and family members must do well to provide all the food necessary for the rites. Some families have to spend all their farm produce on such rites and others even have to borrow some more to meet the required output of food items.

Traditional funeral rites also affect the efforts of development agencies because most of the support they offer to the people are used to perform traditional funeral rites. During an interview with one of the respondents at Afrikids Ghana (a local NGO) which has been helping

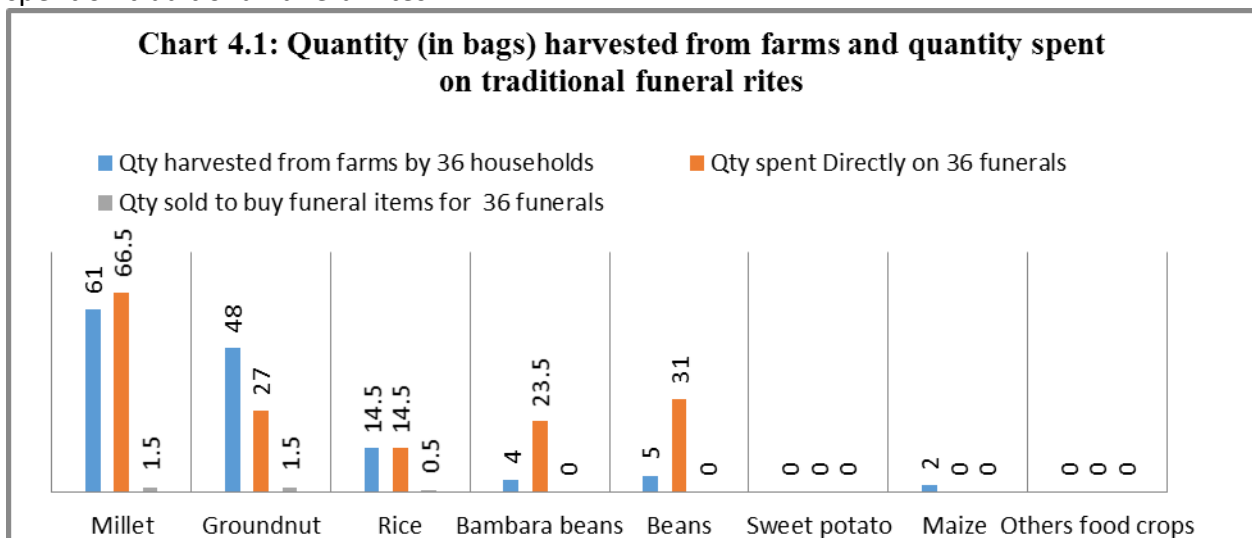


the community to deal with the annual cycle of food shortages, it was emphasized that, traditional funeral rites largely contribute to food insecurity. He added that the support the Afrikids provides for the communities are part of the core activities they implement in their operational area targeting the neediest and the most vulnerable.

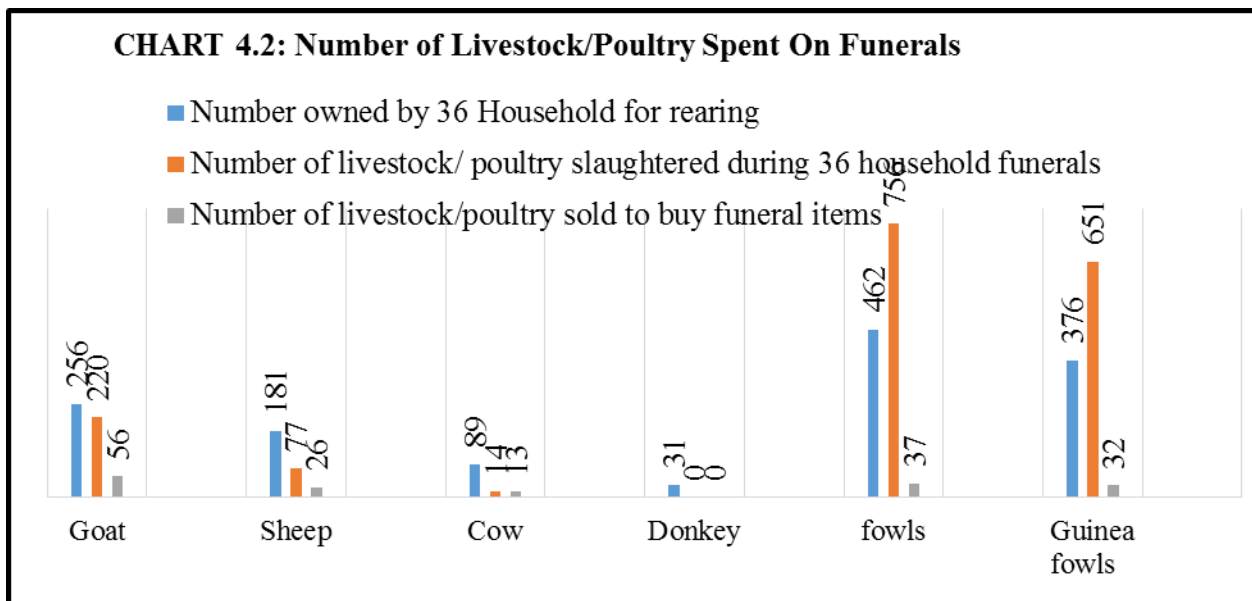
However, he expressed sadness and disappointment that

*“most of these beneficiaries used these donations to perform traditional funeral rites defeating the purpose to which the support was offered to them”*. Thus, confirming the massive role traditional funeral rights in the study community plays in food insecurity

Chart 4.1 and 4.2 show the extent to which more food items and livestock respectively are spent on traditional funeral rites.



Source: Fieldwork, (2014)



Source: Fieldwork, (2014)

## 5.0 Conclusion

The primary focus of the study was to ascertain factual qualitative information about traditional funeral rites and to understand whether this practice is useful or a threat to household food security. It is clear that there is low level of education among the respondents and this is contributing to the refusal by the people of the study area to accept modernity. These respondents together with other elders of the community resisted the wear and tear of traditions and this has contributed to severe food shortages thereby affecting the whole community of Kandiga and its surrounding environment.

Community sensitization and education forums will enlighten the people of the study area to understand the consequences of traditional funeral rites on food security and they will contribute to fight traditional funeral rites thereby improving on food security in the study community.

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