

# Field Testimony

Tanner & Rebecca & Family

## They are Dying!

It was just last Saturday morning. The lights had been off all night, so we were sleeping outside under our mosquito nets. At 5:30am, I awakened to loud drumming 3 compounds away. No real surprise, as three days before an old man had died and they were still performing the funeral. I stood up and stretched as the drumming died off then saw two fellows pick up the homemade skin-drums and carry them off toward the south end of the village. Five minutes later there was drumming from that direction as three gunshots ripped through the morning “quiet”. An older lady had died in the wee hours of the morning and the funeral rites, burial, prayers, and dancing was to begin. I shook my head.

Around 10 a.m., I bicycled out to a junction in the main road to meet a dump truck that was going to Salaga. I wanted to send a message to one of my contacts there. I met a group of eight of our friends from here in Kafaba. “Haven’t you heard?” they asked, “our sister died this morning in Salaga.” She’s a Gonja from Kafaba who was around 45 years old, the senior sister of one of my friends whom I often go to greet or chat with in the afternoon. They buried her in Salaga.

We went ahead with a short language class and around noon as we sat down for lunch there was a knock at our door. Grace (my sister) answered.

It was Sanja, our first language helper and good friend. “I must see Mr. Tanner,” he said. I came out to find a dejected Sanja who wouldn’t answer my customary greetings. “My brother just died!” He mourned. I was shocked, “What? Which brother and when did he die?” Just 10 minutes earlier, his first cousin (they call it brother) had died. Could it be? He was only 20 years old. This was the third death in one day,

all unrelated. He had a sickness with internal injuries from a fall three weeks before. He had been checked at the hospital five days earlier. They could not find anything wrong and told him to go back home. He was talking and leading a normal life that very morning and by 1 p.m. was in eternity.

I rushed toward that end of town, as the sounds of wailing began to swell. A crowd was gathering there and other than the hopeless wailing, there was total silence. Within an hour we were digging his grave. The dirt was so fresh from the old lady, covered minutes earlier, and most of the men hadn’t even had time to bathe when Yaro (the young man) died.

After three hours of pick-axing through the soil, they went to bring the body. Total silence and shock on the faces of the 70 men (ladies/children are PROHIBITED at burials). The burial grounds is a distance from the village, but without turning my head I knew they were bringing the body, as the wailing increased to a crushing pitch that could be heard way out there. They removed the grass mat that was covering the body. As three men raised that corpse - wrapped in total white from head to foot - and placed him into the hard earth, my dear village men’s faces contorted in grief. Never have I seen a Gonja man cry, but the audible sobs that were forced down and the many “Wa-lai, Allah!” that were uttered broke my heart.

The grave was covered in silence. The men shook their heads and I heard many say, “It is too much!” Hopelessness. Yet held in deceit by a combination of old Gonja traditions, fetishes, and a world religion: Islam.

This was one village. On one day. We happened to be there.

Pray for us. We don’t have enough of the language yet, but our God knows that. We need much wisdom.

Sanja came to me and talked of Yaro’s sickness later that evening. Sanja said that as Yaro died, he cried out, “Who can save me, who can save me?!” Sanja understood that as a clinical cry.

It grieves me deeply and grieves God even more. Pray that we will be faithful. That is all God wants from us.

My wife asked me why we had not come sooner. If so, maybe we could have pointed Yaro to the only Light. We pondered that, then had to simply thank God that we are here today. We are one day closer to offering hope to the Yaros. Oh, how they and we need Him!

Thank you for interceding that Gonjas may know Christ,