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Vol 166 partie. (Jue

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To Heaven by Land, Sea, or Air

Article and photographs by
CAROL ee SEN oe i TANCE Ota

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he fish bobbed toward
us, as if borne on a
dark and glistening
wave. It seemed to
nod a symbolic farewell
to each house in the fishing
village of Oshien. Anointed with
sheep's blood and schnapps and
hoisted by the sweat-streaked
arms of the deceased's male
friends and relatives (right), the
wooden fish held the remains of
Dede Tse Nunu, a fishing chief.
Outside Ghana's capital city
of Accra, a handful of wood-
carvers create coffins modeled
on objects of special importance
to the departed.

on the fish (below), a testament much
like those Nunu once netted off
Ghana's coast. Paa Joe learned
his craft in 1961 as an apprentice
to his uncle, Seth Kane
Kwei, who had started carving
the coffins about five years before
and continued making them
until his death in 1992. Today
Paa Joe's shop turns out about
ten coffins a year to house the
deceased who may be kept in
mortuaries for a month or more
while funerals are planned.

Do you find it difficult seeing
your beautiful works of art
disappearing into the ground? I
we asked Paa Joe. I wish some

Commissioned by rich and
poor among the Ga coastal
people as well as others in neighboring
countries, the coffins
celebrate the lives of loved ones
and reflect their status. At
Nunu's funeral more than 2,000
guests attended a ceremony at
once sad and jubilant.

A few days before, in the
nearby town of Nungua, Joseph
Tetteh Ashong known as Paa
Joe put the finishing touches

Fantasy coffins of Ghana will
be featured in the author's book
African Ceremonies and Rituals,
to be published by Harry N.
Abrams, Inc., in 1997.

would be on display for people to appreciate,â\200\235 he said. â\200\234But once one has been used, it has served its purpose. The ground is where it belongs.â\200\235

The memorials are expensive for most Ghanaians. A fantasy coffin costs about \$400 U. S.â\200\224 the average yearly income in Ghanaâ\200\224 depending on the design, wood type, and length of advance notice given to the carver. People routinely spend everything they have on funerals. One friend told us, â\200\234The hardest struggle in life is to make enough income to support the funeral celebration.â\200\235

National Geographic, September 1994

Fantasy Coffins of Ghana

_. A farmer chose a green
feyaiceyaeiiten

_. A pilot from Togo chose a KLM jet.
Some carvers accept commissions
from Europe and the United States,
where coffins are displayed in
museums and galleries.

A lobster will bear the body of a
fisherman who made his living
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West African coast.

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for people of prominence,
such as a paramount chief.

When a dying person has not arranged ova mee)iiten families look to carvers to help make a choice. |
â\200\234Knowing the deceased personâ\200\231s profession and |
interests helps us narrow it down,â\200\235 says
Ben Sowah of Kane Kwei Carpentry Works.

_ Repairing outboard motors in
life, a mechanic chose to be
buried in a Yamaha 40â\200\224the
same kind of motor he used
on his own boat.

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lissions
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cna The family of a goldsmith selected
\ | a coffin shaped like a crab, symbol
ard of his clan.

_. A lobster will bear the body of a
fisherman who made his living
trapping the crustaceans along the
West African coast.

The crew of a fishing fleet captain came
from Cameroon to attend his funeral

in Ghana, where he was buried in this
model of one of his boats.

The eagle coffin is reserved
for people of prominence,
such as a paramount chief.

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~ onion coffin.

A cattle herderâ\200\231s family
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Blending Christian and traditional
beliefs, the Ga pour libations over the
coffin to ask blessings from

the deceased, now among the ranks of

honored ancestors. Families bury the dead
with the comforts and adornments of lifeâ\200\224

handwoven cloth, jewelry, and money.

buried him in a bull.

_. A farmer chose a green
onion coffin.

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_ Painted scales and a pink
satin interior add detail to
a tselÃ© fish coffin.

_. Astylized leopard will
carry the remains of a hunter.

66 try not to rush a job,â\200\235
says carver Paa Joe
(above). â\200\234Everything
must be right before I let
a coffin go.â\200\235

As we watched, he circled the
wood form of a truck destined
for a man who hauled coal. Paa
Joe pulled out his spokeshave

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and went to work, shaping a
piece of wood beneath the front
grille into a bumper.

On the day of the truck driv-
erâ\200\231s wake we returned to Paa
Joeâ\200\231s shop and found the family
waiting to collect the replica of
their loved oneâ\200\231s coal truck.
Many details had been added:

Gas and brake pedals were in
place, red reflectors glowed in
the back, glass mirrors had been
installed, and the driverâ\200\231s favor-
ite saying was displayed over
the windshield.

Yet, to our surprise and the
familyâ\200\231s dismay, the coffin was
not quite ready. Every appren-
tice in the shop was busy paint-
ing chunks of wooden coal
carved into the bed of the truck.
Anxious moments passed. Final-
ly a sign painter arrived and let-
tered the truckâ\200\231s make on the
hood (below). Several more
strokes and the job was done.

A few hours remained before
the wake as the family loaded
the still-wet coffin into their
truck and headed off, happy
with the carverâ\200\231s work. We
wondered if Paa Joe, calm
through it all, had kept to the
motto on the deceasedâ\200\231s truck:
that Godâ\200\231s timeâ\200\224which cannot
be rushed â\200\224is the best. Oo

National Geographic, September 1994

On television

What Every Naturalist
Under Five Should Know

tories gently told acquaint

young children with the natu-

ral world in National Geo-
graphic's new home video series,
GeoKids. Planned especially for
preschoolers, the videos put the
emphasis on facts conveyed through
music, poetry, and puppetry.

We saw a void in video program-
ming available for very young chil-
dren, says Society President Gil
Grosvenor. GeoKids reaches
children at an early stage and com-
municates a value the Society has
always stood for—respect for nature
through increased awareness.

Three characters help children
develop a sense of kinship with wild
animals. Sunny Honeypossum,
far right, Bobby Bushbaby, and
their wise uncle figure, Balzac de
Chameleon, touch children's need
for companionship.

I searched for creatures that
would be both unfamiliar and
charming to children, says creator
Hank Saroyan.

The three puppet friends live in a
magical forest of plants from all
over the world. With the help of an
animated, sneezy flamingo named
Francisco, he's allergic to feath-
ers—Sunny, Bobby, and Balzac
introduce children to many forms

of life, from scurrying leaf-cutting
ants to wobbly infant zebras.
Making use of the Geographic's
extensive live-action-film library,
the videos show adult animals caring
for their babies, young hippos learn-
ing to walk, and beavers building
dams. The first three videos are
Flying, Trying, and Honking
Around, Bear Cubs, Baby
Ducks, and Kooky Kookaburras,
and Cool Cats, Raindrops, and

GROVE PASHLEY

Things That Live in Holes.
Andrew Wilk, vice president of
programming, says, We've packed
in an enormous amount of informa-

tion. Like Really Wild Animalsâ\200\224
videos for children five through
tenâ\200\224 GeoKids can be watched over
and over, with something new
understood each time.â\200\235

GeoKids is available through National
Geographic Home Video and in video
stores nationwide.

The Family That Preys Together

nest (left), which is cradled in the giant arms of a
saguaro cactus. Soon the youngster will join other
family members as they gather each winter morning in the
Sonoran Desert of the American Southwest, divide into
hunting parties, and search for prey like jackrabbits or rats.

â\200\234They hunt together much like a wolf pack,â\200\235 says Univer-
sity of Arizona ornithologist James Dawson. Dawson served
as a consultant to wildlife cinematographer Michael Rich-
ards, who produced EXPLORERâ\200\231s â\200\234Wolves of the Air.â\200\235

This first full-length program to focus on Harrisâ\200\231 hawks
reveals the highly developed social organization of this bird
of preyâ\200\224a rare phenomenon in the avian world.

With a repertoire of tactics such as relay chase, flush and
ambush, and encirclement, Harrisâ\200\231 hawks take the combina-
tion of raptor hunting skills and teamwork to new levels.
EXPLORERâ\200\231 â\200\234Wolves of the Airâ\200\231â\200\231 broadcasts Sunday, Septe-
mber
25, at 9 p.m. ET on TBS Superstation.

A fledgling Harrisâ\200\231 hawk practices flying in and out of the

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC EXPLORER AIRS ON TBS SUPERSTATION, SUNDAYS AT 9 P.M. ET. NATIONAL G
EOGRAPHIC SPECIALS AIR ON PBS; CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.
FOR INFORMATION ON NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC VIDEOS, CALL 1-800-343-6610, MONDAY THROUGH FRID
AY, 8 A.M. TO 8 P.M. ET, IN THE U. S. AND CANADA ONLY.