

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

An Essay on Theatrical Display of Aboakyir Festival

Evans Asante

Lecturer, Department of Theatre Arts, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

Johnson Edu

Lecturer, Department of Theatre Arts, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

Abstract:

The Aboakyir festival is an important cultural ingredient of the Efutu ethnic group in Winneba, Ghana. The Aboakyir festival is a demonstration of the values, beliefs and religious traits of the Efutus. There have been several research works on the Aboakyir festival since its inception. This study looks at the Aboakyir festival from the theatrical view point. It is important to emphasise the dramatic enactment of this festival as an irreplaceable core value in attracting people far and near. The paper discusses key theatrical elements which are inherent the Aboakyir festival. The 2016 traditional calendar year forms the basis of this paper. The research gathered data through interviews and observation. Video and photography were some of tools used in recording the data for the performances and other key events.

Keywords: Aboakyir, Efutu, Festivals, Theatre, Asafo Company, Costumes, Winneba

1. Introduction

It has been observed that the *Aboakyir* festival of the *Efutu* tribe in Ghana is one of the major festivals celebrated in Ghana. Most people argue that it is the maiden festival celebrated in Ghana in the calendar year According to Takyi (2015), the term *Aboakyir* literally means the catching of an animal which promotes a communal cohesion of the Efutus.

The festival according to the calendar this year was slated on Saturday the 4th of May, 2016. The event saw to the catching of a live deer with the bare hands and ritually selected and sacrificed by the high priest (*Osow Nipa*), to the Efutu tribal god, Penkye *Otu*. Its significance is the expression of the revival of the native's inner moral and ethical qualities as well as to portray the culture, religious, social and political identity which invariably involves the predominance of the spirit of unity and peace as stressed by the Tufuhen (2016) who happens to be the head of the two Asafo companies: The Tuafo, and Dentsefo,.

Apparently, the *Aboakyir* festival is an age long cherished custom since its inception and the events have been re-enacted severally with pomp and pageantry annually. The community participation of this festival involving both the audience (visitors) and the performers (the natives) lend its participatory structure to that of the popular theatre tradition model, a social dramatic form that emphasizes collective community participation. Additionally, it stresses community and inter-personal involvement in self-realization and uses exciting and familiar performance forms in the various communities specifically such as music, dance storytelling, puppetry and mime to either validate those cultural forms or serve as an adequate instrument to bring about social change in a given community. Basically, it is believed that festivals are generally considered to be types of cultural performances and as such are studied by folklorists as well as anthropologists (Stoeltje, 1992). Cultural performances may be found in all societies around the world today and in the past. There are diverse festivals embodied with theatrical elements so is the *Aboakyir* Festival. Opoku, (1970) in his study of festivals in Ghana identifies several festivals like the Yam Festival of the Ewe of the Volta Region, the Homowo of the Ga of the Greater Accra and the Bakatue of the Edina of the Central Region, Adaye of the Asantes which are all celebrated to rekindle the life of the people who celebrate them.

Theatre as a tool is a world recognized platform that promotes moral lessons drawn from performances to ensure adequate behavioural change for community sensitization and development. However, the focus of theatre is primarily keyed towards education, information and entertainment which is evident in the *Aboakyir* festival. Indeed, according to an informant during the 2016 celebration of the *Aboakyir* festival, it was regarded as an occasion where Christian and non-Christian alike, citizens, foreigners and people of divergent political persuasions or inclination congregated to reflect on achievement of their forefathers. Particularly, the heroic and noble achievements of their fore bearers which only did not fill them with pride but also inspired and urged them on to their collective responsibility to seek progress, development and well-being of their Traditional area, thus leaving valued legacy for prosperity.

An interesting insight into the historical perception of the *Aboakyir* festival by the Tufuhen (2016) was the fact that Winneba in the 13th and 14th Century was an acephalous state where the religious leaders played significant role in the people's lives as far as their religion and health needs were concerned. Significantly, it was from the religion of the Efutus that evolved the festival being celebrated. Theatre is also known to have evolved from religion. For this reason, the study seeks to examine the theatrical display of the *Aboakir* festival in order to understand and interpret its significance in the making of the festival.

2.Objectives

This paper seeks to

- ✓ To explore the theatrical elements inherent in the Aboakyir festival.
- ✓ To project the theatrical appreciation of the Aboakyir festival.

3.Methodology

The research was qualitatively conducted employing multiple data collection method. The researchers adopted qualitative approach because the study concerned understanding people and their social and cultural context. The work was accomplished through interviews, and a combination of observations. The historical contents of the study were obtained through historical documents, numerical records, oral statements and relics. There were interview sessions with elders and other stakeholders in the area. The researchers used both direct-participant and indirect-participant observation to access data on the actual performance and celebration. The data for the performance were recorded by employing video and photography methods.

4.The Aboakyir Festival-Historical Perspective

The *Aboakyer* or the *deer hunt* festival is celebrated annually every first Saturday of May, as an honour to *Otu*, a god of war in Winneba, and *Osim Pam*, the great warrior who led the Efutus through their migration to their present settlement. Eight weeks before the commencement of the festival, chiefs, elders, *Supi* (the heads of individual companies), and the *Osow* (priest), meet at the *Omanhene's* (paramount chief) palace to discuss the upcoming activities. After this meeting the *Omanhene* places a Winneba district ban on drumming. It is believed that the elders of the town use this quiet period to perform rituals pertaining to the old culture. At the same time, smaller groups meet secretly to rehearse the music and dance that is to be performed on the festival day. Such meetings are held late in the night and are always followed by rituals. Saturday was selected for the celebration because it is believed the Efutu first arrived at Winneba on a Saturday after their migration from the Western Sudan Empire. The ban on music or noise making is lifted two weeks before the festival; the ban on hunting expires on the festival day, after the two groups have returned from the forest with their game. Formally, the rituals honouring *Penkye Otu* included human sacrifice. Every year a member of the royal family was offered up in this capacity. This practice ended around the 16th century. Consequently, elders, members of the *asafo* companies, and the priest (known by the title of *Acheampong*, which is also the name of the god he represents) consulted the oracles and asked the god to accept a different sacrifice to replace the human one. "The lion's blood is the only thing close enough to the human being," claimed on of the respondents. After several consultations, the god finally accepted the deer as the annual sacrifice, thus the rise of the *Aboakyer* (or the deer hunt). After that, the deer hunt became the most important event in the ritual calendar of the natives who lives in. These transgressors are forgiven for variety of reasons, including: They create awareness of upcoming events, festival competition is keen, groups need to rehearse their choreographed movements and music compositions, and also the economic status of most participants makes it impossible for them to pay any fine. Formerly slaves had been used for these sacrifices, but *Penkye Otu* demanded pure native blood from the royal family. Perhaps it would have been better to sacrifice just a single person than to go for a lion.

At present, sacrifices are made to the gods and ancestors. In return, these entities offer their protection and strengthen communal and familial bonds between *asafo* companies and the community as a whole.

5.Discussion-Elements of Theatre in Aboakyir Festival

5.1. Props

Festivals are generally considered to be types of cultural performance which encapsulates theatrical elements that exist in societies in most part of the world. Turner and MacAloon are of the view that there are diverse examples of such festivals ranging from those associated with religious traditions or with localized ritual entertainment (Turner, ed., 1982; MacAloon, 1984). Even dramas and films can be classified as cultural performances with most artistic elements found in festivals. An example is the *Homowo* festival which is celebrated by the *Ga* traditional area in the Greater Accra Region, Ghana, West Africa. The *Homowo* festival as indicated is therefore a celebration of victory over the hunger the *Gas* faced periods ago. During the celebration a special meal was prepared of unfermented corn powder called *kpokpoi* with fish palmtree soup. In theatre, items used at festival ground such as the meal, *kpokpoi* in the bowl or earthenware is referred to as props. Further examples observed were during the trance of the priest whilst leading the procession towards the durbar ground where participants congregated to receive the deer that has been brought from the bush, it was detected that he held in his hand a fly

whisk that was manipulated aerially by her as a sign of communication to the gods. An elder in the procession also had a bottle of Schnapp in his right hand as a medium of communication. One may also indicate that the various musical instruments played to herald and sustain the interest of participants are considered as props in this regard as well as the deer being sought for. Gillette (2000) explains that props are object held or found on stage which is primary designed tools used to provide clues about the personality and the socioeconomic status of the inhabitant of the set. Colourful larger than life *size umbrellas* were used to functionally protect the chiefs and queen mothers from the scorching sun which also added visual and aerial beauty to the procession. Artistically, the umbrellas were held by the umbrella bearers and which were revolved either clock wise or anti-clock wise and occasionally thrust up and down in visually pleasing movements. Each of these umbrellas was made of colourful magnificent fabrics. Such as red, yellow and blue which were outstanding in appearance. The *linguist staff* was another prop to behold. Most of them were carved in wood and painted in gold colour to signify the social strata for which it represents. Besides, this symbolic object was regarded as a sign of authority of the chiefs. Significantly, each linguist staff had a totem placed on the top portion of the staff. Among others were; a stool and a lion, a crow and pelican. These symbols were representative of the clan being represented at the festival.



Figure 1: Various umbrellas and linguist staff being displayed as props

5.2. Costume

Another important element found in the *Aboakyir* festival was the use of costumes and regalia. According to Barbara and Cletus Anderson as cited by Gillette (2000) in their text *Costume Design*, "Anything worn onstage is a costume, be it layers of clothing or nothing at all." Specifically, this definition includes all clothing. Be it, makeup and accessory, hairdressing, underclothing, jewellery, worn or carried by a character in a production. The chiefs and sub-chiefs draped colourful traditional cloths on themselves known as *kente* which had semblance of the of the ancient Roman Toga which distinguished Roman citizens from everybody else in the world and this was recognized in the earliest part of fifth century B.C. The striking difference between both styles of draped fabric was the nature with which they were worn. The *Akan Kente* dress style of dressing where no inner is worn was the same style assumed by the Chiefs and Queens in Efutu. They draped the *kente* cloth on their body without an inner wear. Reference can be made with the early days in Roman Theatre where major characters draped cloth on themselves. The only difference is that the Romans wore an inner top (Barton, 1963). Most of the *kente* cloth

worn by the Chief was hand woven. The Queen mothers were no exception as well as some of the entourages that followed both the Chiefs and the Queen mothers. Appropriately, crowns were worn by most of the Chiefs which were designed predominantly in colours of gold and black. The Queen mothers draped on their heads scarfs which were pre-dominantly in colours of gold, brown, patches of green and blue. An interesting sight to behold was the use of *green leaves* as costumes. These leaves were draped around the necks of some of the performers, especially, those assigned for the catch and few of them who led the Chiefs' entourages.



Figure 2: A member of Asafo Company costumed with green leaves

5.3. Makeup

Makeup is a vital theatrical element used in the transformation of an actor into a character. Bellman (1983) posits that of all scenographic elements, costume and makeup are physically and symbolically closest to the actor and his character. Bellman is of the view that these elements give clear indications of primary clue to the age, social status, health and vitality of the character. Technically in theatre it is said that, stage makeup enhances the illusion that the actor has become the character. It is imperative to know that a lot of the communication that take place between the performer and the actor is through visual perception. Hence make up and costume creates such platforms. As part of the process, the *Asafo* members who went into the bush for the deer catch painted themselves (whole body) with brown clay and had no shirt on. According to some members of the *Asafo* catch team, the red clay was to represent the earth so that during the catch the deer would not recognize the catch team as human beings but rather the earth. Some of the participants in the bush also drape leaves around their bodies to disguise themselves from the deer to create a feeling of bush images. The maidens who led the procession had circular symbols tattooed on their bodies. These were designed in white and black. The tattoos were printed both in front and back of their upper torsos and braided their hair to create uniformity. The tribal priests painted their face and upper torso with white clay.

5.3.1. Setting and Staging

The setting of a production may be referred to as the overall visual appearance of the play or production's background. Basically, this has got to do with the various sceneries establishing the visual performing areas of the stage or found space. Apparently, festival celebrations do not have definite established locales for the event. The celebration moves from place to place and the movement could depend on the dictates of the gods or any spirit that matter. In the case of the 2016 Aboakyir festival, the identified locales where the activities took place primarily were the shrine where the deer was finally sent to for the sacrifice, the durbar ground where all participants gathered to receive the deer after a successful catch and the forest where the deer was caught. In theatre thee identified areas are referred to as the locales. They are venues that accentuate and support the occasion. In fact, space configuration lends it structures to the activity in concerned.

At the *Zion Park*, durbar ground canopies were mounted to sit the Chiefs, Queen mothers, guests, and other official dignitaries. It was observed that corporate institutions sponsoring the festival also mounted individual canopies to exhibit and promote their products. The amalgamation of these canopies and larger than-life umbrellas added colour to the durbar ground. Another observation was the shifting of the festival ceremony from one community to the other. In theatre, this action could be referred to as multiple setting which has scenes changing from one locale to the other.

5.4. Colour

Colour as an artistic medium of communication played an enormous role in the entire festival. Kuofi (2012) espouses on the effect and importance of colour as far as interpretation and understanding is concerned. He addresses the issue of colour as when light rays hit an object our eyes respond to the light that is bounced back and we can clearly see that colour. He is also of the view that "if it weren't for light we would have no colour."

The *Asafo* groups as discussed by Takyi (2015) are seen in distinguished colours which brands them into groupings during the festival. The *Dentsefo* are represented by the colours red, gold, orange, black and pink. The *Tuafo*'s are also represented by the colours white, blue, violet and green. Another colour distinction is the use of the British flag (Union Jack) which was used by the *Dentsefo* and the Ghana flag used by the *Tuafo* during the celebration. According to the *Asafo* members, they were deer hunting trophies obtained from the colonial masters and the then President of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah in the 1960 and 1965 respectively. The colour added elegance, pride and to an extent tension and conflict because the whole festival apart from its value and cultural significance it was also seen as a competition among the *Asafo* groups.



Figure 3: *Asafo* Company smears their bodies with colour



Figure 4: A sword bearer decorated with body marks with the use of colour

5.5. Characters

The Greek theatre has Thespis as the foremost actor (character) recorded in its history. This was further developed in European literary theatre. The indigenous African theatre could not have been made possible without a character(s). Aboakyir festivals for example, involve various actors or characters right from the beginning of the event right through to the last day. The *priest* of the people is one of such characters. He serves as a mediator between the ancestors and his people. He performs rituals to mark the beginning or the end of ceremonies or festivities. He is consulted before the chief or king of the community can initiate any celebration. As the custodian of the people, his role in the performance cannot be overlooked. He is seen as the spiritual leader or in this case "African Thespis").

The next performer or actor is the chief or king. The king's role in the celebration of the festival is important because he is seen as the *physical* leader of the people. Prior to the durbar grounds where rich performances are enacted, the King is paraded in a palanquin where he is required to dance to drum tunes. This performance does not come by chance, as the king needs to rehearse and master the dance movements to enhance its aesthetics. A chief who is not able to perform the traditional dance is seen as a tragedy and frowned upon in the African society

6. Distinctive Nature of Theatre in Aboakyir Festival

Wilson (1994) explicitly indicates that how and when rituals, ceremonies, or stories develop into the separate realm of theatre is a matter of conjecture. This should not be disputed because theatre as a distinct art form has emerged in many

different countries as a vehicle of communication that utilizes and blends all the other art forms. It is imperative for one to compare town festivals, traditional society's public rituals to theatre, which reflect and justify contemporary values and societal situations, and which offer vision of the future. This idea can be said of some theatre productions that focus on preserving culture, fostering social cohesion, releasing tension from daily life activities and inculcating value and moral attitudes. Theatre as an art form mirrors live situations and makes the human personality understand who he is and puts the audience or observer in a position to come into terms with reality of his actions. The deer festival of the *Efutus* is clearly an art form exhibiting the elements and principles of the performing arts and visual arts forms. Just as in theatre a *rehearsal* is done to fine tune the acts and scenes of the play, equally some rehearsals are also done in preparation for the *Aboakyir* festival. In this instance both *Asafo* groups met on different occasions to map out strategies to catch the deer and also rehearsed how to process to the *durbar* ground and to the forest. Among others were the costume trail sessions and how to improve on the make-up design.

The *Aboakyir* festival had cultural significances that focused on the preservation of culture and unity in diversity due to the homogeneity of the participants. The organization of this deer hunt festival had theatrical elements sub-consciously integrated into the celebration. Dramatic devices like conflict and suspense among others heightened the **mood** of the event. **Impersonation** was also incorporated in the festive occasion, where the priest impersonated the gods while some of the performers impersonated the deer and mimed the movement of the deer. The only difference between a traditional theatrical presentation and the festival was the non-definition of a specified environment of action for the festival activity, whatever space that was available was used. In this regards the festival location moved from place to place in time and space. *"Throughout the world, cultures have rituals, ceremonies and impersonations of people, animals or spirits"* (Wilson, 1994, p.5). In the same breath Wilson espouses that almost every culture recorded throughout history or studied by anthropologists, we find rituals and religious ceremonies that include theatrical elements. A key feature of theatre is that aspect that brings together a live audience in the presence of performers. Bentina (2014) puts it that Festivals and ceremonies are a fundamental activities of African traditional society. This is because man is a social being. According to him in Nigeria, the whole year round is full of activities ranging from festivals like Ikoro, Ekpe, Oro and Ogbogloma among others, this is because man is a social being. Turner is of the view that:

Theatre and human race are as related as mirror and reflection.....he comments on the fact that when one studies a particular era, he/she gets to know the religious, social, political and economic influences of the time you learn the people's desires, ideals and needs and in fact get to know the present and past history. A comparison of the past eras not only emphasizes the evolution of drama, but it elucidates the theatre of today and prognosticates that of tomorrow. (Turner, 2002).

It is believed that wherever there is human activity theatre also exists. This we say the world is a stage and we the human beings are the characters.

7. Conclusion

The elements of theatre are fundamental in the process and development of festivals and other rituals. However, less attention is given to these elements identifiable in festivals and other traditional rituals. Most Ghanaian communities frown on people describing their rituals as theatrical; the word "theatre" sounding derogatory in their ears. This perhaps has contributed negatively to the unending argument as to whether, Ghanaians and for that matter Africans have any form of structured theatre.

The researchers sought to contribute to this debate by assessing the various elements of theatre in Aboakyir Festival. The various elements outlined in this study suggest Ghanaians have a well-structured performance which can be equated to the performance/rituals which were done in honour of Dionysus out of which theatre evolved.

It is evident from this study that, the Aboakyir festival can easily be adopted for stage productions considering the number of stage/theatre elements embellished in it. It is recommended to playwrights and stage directors especially those in Africa to help promote and preserve these rich cultural rituals by adopting them in their works.

8. References

- i. Barton, L. (1963). *Historic Costume for the Stage*. Boston: Walter H. Baker Company.
- ii. Bellman, F. W. (1983). *Scene Design, Stage Lighting, Sound, Costume, and Makeup*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc.
- iii. Bentina A. (2014). Socio-Religious Significance of Ikoro and Ekpe Festivals in Akwete Ndoki Community of Abia State, Nigeria. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, Vol. 4, No. 5.
- iv. Gillette, M. (2000). *Theatrical design and production (4th ed.)*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- v. Kquofi, S. (20012). *General Knowledge in Art for Senior High Schools*. Kumasi: Approacher's (Ghana) Limited.
- vi. MacAloon, J. (1984). Rite, drama, festival, spectacle: Rehearsals toward a theory of cultural performance. *Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues*.

- vii. Stoeltje, B. (1992). "Festival." In Bauman (ed.), *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- viii. Takyi E.H. (2015). A Comparative Study of the Concept of Atonement in the Aboakyer Festival of the Effutu Tribe in Ghana and the Yom Kippur Festival of the Old Testament: Implications for Adventist Mission Among the Effutu. *Andrews University. Dissertation paper*.
- ix. Tufuhen (2016). *Aboakyir Festival 2016*. Efutu Traditional area, Winneba.
- x. Turner, V. (ed.) (1982). *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual*. Smithsonian Institution Press.
- xi. Tunner, A. F. (2002). *Basic Drama Projects (7th ed.)*. Logan Iowa: Clark Publishing.
- xii. Wilson, E. (1994). *The Theatre Experience(6th ed.)*. New York: McGRAW-HILL, INC.