

PERFORMING ART: A PIVOT OF TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS IN GHANA

Linda Armah ¹, Appiah Salomey Darkoa ², Theresah Ampomah ³, Frank Osei-Sarfo ⁴

¹Atwima Kwanwoma Senior High School, P.O.BOX 5401, Trede -Kumasi Ashanti Region Ghana

²Offinso College of Education, P. O. Box 7, Offinso Ashanti Region, Ghana

³St. Ambrose College of Education, Dormaa-Akwamu P. O. Box 25, Wamfie, Bono Region, Ghana

⁴Bolgatanga College of Education, P. O. Box 767, Bolgatanga, Upper East Region, Ghana

ABSTRACT

Festival celebrations in the Eastern Region of Ghana are occasions where people make merry and also exhibit their cultural values. These values are mostly seen through the performing art forms that go on during the celebrations. Though these performing art forms give a lot of education, not much has been researched into. This study sought to identify, describe and discuss the role performing art forms in festivals celebrations. Phenomenology method which is under qualitative research approach was used. In all 45 respondents were sampled for the study using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The primary data was collected using interviews, observations and opinionnaire. The results showed that performing art forms provide essential knowledge to visitors and community members who attend traditional festivals celebrated in the Eastern Region of Ghana. Some of the knowledge that they acquire are the meaning of some gestures used in dances, tonal variations of poems that are recited and symbolical meanings of libation offered in during the celebration. The study concludes that music, dance and drama which are all within the domain of performing art forms educate a lot of people. Also, it brings out the culture and traditions of the people in the Eastern Region and then unite them.

Keyword: *Performing art, traditional festival, celebration, gesture, libation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Performing arts are the art forms perceived by our senses especially the kinesthetic sense. These

art forms are not made but they are executed or performed thus the artists use either their body or voice to convey artistic expression such as music, dance, drama, storytelling and acting (Adinku,1994).

Similarly, Adjepong and Obeng (2018) are of the view that performing arts comprise of music, dance and drama which normally go on during festival celebration, funeral rites, durbars, marriage and naming ceremonies to entertain people. They added that these performing arts promotes physical fitness and also teaches societal norms and values.

Apart from the emotions that performing arts elicit, Amenuke, Dogbe, Asare, Ayiku & Baffoe (1991) also assert that the dances and poetry recitals that go on during festivals celebrations educates and teach people how to behave in the societies in which they live. Performing arts in

festival celebration is generally believed to provide both intrinsic and instrumental benefits to the people in a particular community. McCarthy et al. (2004) explained that the intrinsic benefits of performing arts in festival celebration comprise deep emotional experience, cognitive growth, empathy and social bonding. They further clarified that the instrumental benefits in performing arts on the other hand are the community development, economic activity and cross-cultural understanding of activities. The relevance of these performing arts forms in these festivals enrich people's lives and educate them. Appiah (2004) is of the view that performing art comprise of drumming, dancing, jubilating and chanting to promote religious and cultural activities such as festivals, funerals, naming ceremonies and other rites in the African traditional society. In supporting Appiah, Lopes (2007) added that performing arts comprise dance, music, opera, oratory, mime and other art forms in which human performance is the main product. Lopes further elucidated that those who involve themselves in the performing arts normally put on

special costume and make up to attract the audience who observe their activities.

2. METHODOLOGY

The data presented below was gathered from towns such as Akropong-Akuapim, Koforidua, Akwamufie and Kyebi all within the Eastern Region of Ghana. The study made use of qualitative techniques and tools (Creswell,2012; Fraenkel & Wallen,2009 and Kothari (2004) in undertaking the study. A phenomenological research design was used. Phenomenology aims at creating rich and deep interpretation of a phenomenon through instinct and focuses on the relevant knowledge. It also encompasses interviews, observations and narratives about the festivals celebrated by the various towns (Kafle,2011; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Using purposive (Etikan et al.,2016) and snowball Creswell (2012) and (Battaglia,2011) sampling techniques, the researchers selected 45 respondents for the study. The data were collected from respondents using interviews, observations and opinionnaire. The unstructured and semi-structured interviews were used to source information from respondents. Thus face- to-face and telephoning were the main media through which the interviews were conducted. More so, the various performing art forms in the festivals were observed and opinions were also sort from respondents. Several photographs were taken by the researchers on the field to support the study. Data collected from the primary and sources were assembled, critically analyzed, summarized and conclusion were drawn from them. The entire information was described and presented in descriptive form (Gibbs,2007).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study revealed that the traditional festivals celebrated in the Easten exhibit several performing arts forms which educate, elicit emotions and also enrich the lives of people. More so, the study established that performing arts forms such as music, dance, drama and verbal art were found in Akwantukese festival celebrated in Koforidua, Odwira festival celebrated in Akropong-Akuapim Ohum festival celebrated in Kyebi and Apafram festival celebrated in Akwamufie. These performing arts forms are grouped under the following sub-heading which are music, dance, drama and verbal art.

3.1. Music

Music in festivals is regarded not only as a medium of artistic expression but also provides an avenue for individuals and corporate expression of feelings. During Akwantukese festival celebration, different kinds of songs are sung for specific purposes. This includes veneration of the gods and the ancestors for leading them peacefully to the New Juaben (Koforidua) landscape. Other songs are also sung to express their acknowledgement to the landlords who gave them some place to stay. (Nana Obugya Asante and Nana Adjin Asamoah Kwame, personal communication,2017, 28th October). Below are some of the songs sung during the festival cerebation;

Krobea Asante Kotok], Jbotan tim nie ee,

Asante Kotok] a, Jda asuo Pra ne Offin ho oo.

Jbotantim a asuo yiri na entumi pia no,

*Jbotantim a Jda nsukeseε ho a Akwamu, Akyem,
Agona, Asebu, Ahanta, Bono, Gyaman,
Komenda, Kumawu, Ns]k], Wasa ne Wenchi sa bi
nom.*

*Se krobea Asante Kotok] di amia ne Dwaben dea
Jb]ma ooo.*

*Asante Kotok] Ayokoman, ntumi nk] nya Dwaben,
se mpo Asanteman tete pansam a, Dwaben ye
krobea Asante aniwa ooo.*

Translation

Krobea Asante Kotok], the mighty rock,

Asante Kotok] who lies between river Pra and Offin.

The mighty rock that cannot be pushed by flooded river, a mighty rock which lies around a big river that Akwamu, Akyem, Agona, Asebu, Ahanta, Bono, Gyaman, Komenda, Kumawu, Ns]k], Wasa and Wenchi fetch some to drink.

If Krobea Asante Kotok] gets a problem, Dwaben does not get some. Asante Kotok], an Oyoko state cannot go without Dwaben. Even if Asante Kotok], becomes despair, Dwaben becomes the hope for Krobea Asante.

The above song proclaims the power and strength of the Asante state of which New Juaben (Koforidua) is part. It also appreciates and gives recognition to the two big rivers (Offin and Pra) which supply water to Asante and its

neighbouring towns. Besides, the song declares the tremendous role Dwaben played in the numerous battles that Asante had with other states. This song is sung to announce to people the New Juaben's affiliation to the Asantes and their contribution toward the Asantes in the numerous battles they won. Moreover, some of the songs praise some of the chiefs who contributed so much in the successful accomplishment of their journey. One of such songs is as follows;

Dwaben eee, Dwaben a]de ne nsapan ato]benfo.

Aketewa Nam nsa yem nso]domankoma wuo a fa no ooo. Nana Adarkwa Yiadom ne Osei Hwedie ye ma mo amo oo na mo aye bi a ma yen ooo.

Asantehene Nana Agyeman Opambo] ye wo ase se]ko ba a no wo ka yen b]] mu. Dwaben dada ne Dwaben fofor] beka wo daa aaa. Sedee]dasani nsa ntumi nkata Onyame ani nti, Dwaben fofor] kae ekona Asokore, Biretuo Effiduase ne Agona Oyoko w]

Akwantukesee abenedie mu daa aaa.

Translation

Dwaben, Dwaben who was able to greet the powerful traditional priest (Aketewa Nam) and did not die, Nana Adarkwa Yiadom and Osei Hwedie we congratulate you for your good works. Asantehene Nana Agyeman Opambo] we thank you for bringing us together when war erupted.

Asante Dwaben and New Juaben will forever remember you.

The fact that a human being's hand cannot close the eye of God, New Juaben will remember the *Ekona Asokore, Biretuo Effiduase and Agona Oyoko* in the challenges faced during the great migration.

Information gathered revealed that the second song is sung to praise the two brave chiefs (Nana Adarkwa Yiadom and Osei Hwedie) of Dwaben who were able to shake hands with a powerful traditional priest (Aketewa Nam) and did not die. According to Nana Adjin Asamoah Kwame, this traditional priest was tall, fearful, robust, plump and very powerful and anyone who shakes his hands dies instantly but when these two chiefs were bold enough to shake him they did not die. Also, it was these two chiefs who led the people from Dwaben to the New Juaben. For that reason, this song is sung by the *kwadwom* group every

year during the Akwantukese festival celebration to remember these ancestors. Furthermore, some songs are also sung to acknowledge the various river deities for their contribution to them. An example of such song is seen below;

]domankoma b]]Asuo bɔɔ ɔkwan, emu panin ne hwan?

Asuo se ofiri tete. ɔkwan se ofiri tete, emu panin ne hwan?

Asuo Suhyien, ɔbaatanpa a ɔda ɔkyeman mu.

Asuo ɔbaatanpa a ɔgye ahɔhɔɔ, na ahɔhɔɔ di emu mpataa ne atidie. Nana Asafo Boateng, Nana Anka Akyeamfour ene Nana Yaw Omane New Juabenman da moa se yi moaye.

Asuo suhyien, asuo kwao ne nesuwansuwa a aka New Juabenman da mo ase ooo. Mo ayeɛye se, na efata, mo susan mpo yi nnɔbae ma New Juabenman, ma wɔdidi meen.

Akwantukesee afahye ama New Juabenman biakoye, asomdwoe ne ɔdɔ. Kɔfabae Daasebre Oti Boateng, New Juabenman ma wo a mo oyame nyhira ooo.

Mo ne yɔ Daasebre, New Juaben manhene.

Translation

God created the river and road which one is the eldest?

The river says it was there from the inception.

The road says it was there from the beginning who is the eldest?

River *Suhyien*, good mother who lies on the *Akyem* land.

A river that receives strangers and gives them fishes like tilapia and mud fish to eat. Nana Boateng, Nana Anka Akyeamfour and Nana Yaw Omane all the people of New Juaben state thank and praise you.

River *Suhyien*, river *Kwao* and other rivers in the New Juaben state thank you.

Your run off even gives abundant food for the general public to eat.

The *Akwantukese* festival has given the people of New Juaben unity, peace and love. Originator *Daasebre*, the people of New Juaben thank

thank you and may God bless you. Well done Daasebre, the *Omanhene* (paramount chief) of New Juaben (Koforidua).

The song above praises and thanks the various river deities that are in the New Juaben traditional area and also, thank the three prominent chiefs who played a major role before their migration. The song also denotes that the river deities are mothers who because of their generosity received them as strangers and provided for their livelihood. In view of this, they sing this song to announce to people the motherly love these river deities have exhibited and are still exhibiting to them. These songs were sung with the help of horn blowers known as *mmenhyenfoɔ* in Akan language.



Figure 1: Horn blowers (*mmenhyenfoɔ*)

3.2. Dance

Dance is an art form which is seen everywhere in the Ghanaian traditional society and it is an embodiment of one's life from birth to death and showcases the culture, beliefs and aspirations of some people. Also, it is a language used to express one's emotional state and thoughts which emits through the body and shows in facial expression and gestures. Some dances are performed to entertain the attendees and make them excited. These dances are very beautiful, attractive and superb. The dances that were observed during the festival's celebrations were *adowa*, *bomaa*, *bɔsoe*, *asaadua* and *kete*. The researchers' observations and data gathered from other key respondents interviewed revealed that *kete* and *adowa* are the common dances which are frequently performed in all the festivals studied.

3.2.1. Adowa Dance

The study shown that the *adowa* dance came about when some hunters imitated the steps of an

antelope. The respondents gave a story that there was a queen mother of Asante (Nana Tutuwaa) who became sick and the deities instructed that traditional priest should use the blood of an antelope (*adowa*) to prepare medicine for her. For that reason, selected hunters in the town were asked to go the forest to look for the animal. When the men captured the live antelope, they then imitated its unique steps and movements because they were happy that the queen mother was going to be healed and from then, the steps and movements turned into a dance. In affirming this, Ampomah (2014) also mentioned that the *adowa* dance was created when some warlords of Asante were sent to the bush to bring a live antelope and they imitated the steps of the animal in partying the restoration of the queen mother's health. The study revealed this dance was formally performed during funerals but now it is performed throughout traditional ceremonies such as marriage ceremonies, festivals and durbars.

Likewise, Asare (2014) and Duodu (1994) mentioned that *adowa* is performed during social gathering like funerals, marriage ceremonies, puberty rites, durbars and festivals. From the interviews and observations made, I realized that the *adowa* dance is performed by both male and female of all ages. The dance is being performed with gestures and movements and all these have meanings. It was found that in *adowa* dance when a woman dances around a man and taps her waist line where her waist beads lay, it indicates she is a woman who wear beads, marriageable and can satisfy the man. Again, when a woman raises the eye brows and blinks the eyes, it means she is decoying a man to come and propose to her. More so, a man dancing with both hands stretched forth with a gritted fist and shakes the fist towards the woman's direction, means that the man is asking the woman whether she is prepared for relationship. Interviews conducted revealed that women swinging the waist to touch men while dancing signifies that they are inviting the men to come and propose to them. On the other hand, when a man holds his right arm up and support it with his left hand at the elbow point and shakes it when dancing, it signifies that the man says he has a gargantuan penis and so if any woman thinks she is brave, she should come and try. Furthermore, a woman dancing around a man and hit mid-section of her thigh (*ataaso*) to a man and throws the hand back as if she is driving

houseflies, it means that if the man thinks his manhood is big as her thigh, she is not afraid.

It was found that gesticulation such as interlocking both the right and left forefingers when dancing means the creator wants to share affection with the other. Respondents further indicated that when a dancer joins the thumb and fore-finger of the left hand to form a circle and then inserts the right fore-finger in the circle, it signifies he or she is single and any interested person can come forward. Besides, dancing with the face down and tapping the orb with the palm means the dancer wants to engage some in chatting and this gesture is mostly used by the male dancers. Clapping the hands when dancing stands for unity or togetherness. Twisting the waist and bending it down with a rhythmic leg movement make the dance look very attractive and superb. A woman raising and turning her legs when dancing indicates that she is strong and beautiful and can face any challenge that comes her way. All these gestures that are seen in adowa dance are very beautiful and aesthetically pleasing in sense that the non-verbal communication action used expresses some feelings. It can be inferred from the findings that any gesticulation and sign that a dancer makes have meaning and he or she has to be trained before it can be executed. Some pictures of the dances can be seen in Figures 2, 3,4 and 5.



Figure: 2 Adowa dancers



Figure: 3 A male adowa dancer



Figure: 4 Adowa dancers

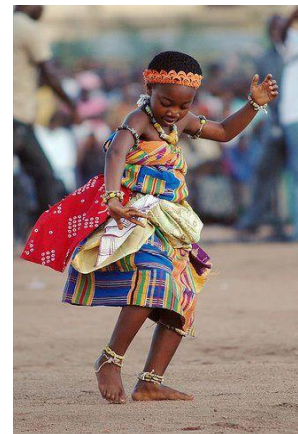


Figure: 5 A girl who dances adowa

3.2.2. Dance

It was discovered through the study that the *kete* dance was captured during war from the Volta Region (Kete Krachi) by the Asantes. In confirming this, Cudjoe (2015) indicated that the *kete* dance is believed to have been conquered from the Volta Region specifically Kete Krachi by some Asante hunters. The study revealed that *kete* is a court dance which is mostly used to welcome chiefs and other prominent people to functions such as funerals, festivals, marriage ceremonies and durbars. It was found that this particular dance was performed by males and females but *kete* is strictly for adults. The gestures and actions that the *kete* dancers make have meanings and anyone who do not perform it well is reprimanded. It is for this reason why children are strictly not allowed to dance. *Kete* is performed by both men and women and all gestures that they use have meanings (Cudjoe, 2015 and Duodu, 1994). It was explained that any person who do not use the correct and appropriate gestures is chastised or humiliated in public. Respondents indicated that it is very important for the dancer to be mindful

when dancing in order not to go against the rules attached to the dance. According to the respondents a dancer dancing with a basic walking steps of varying length and strength, putting the two hands together like begging for something shows that the dancer is asking permission from authorities before dancing. Bending down, swinging the waist left to right and turning fist left to right signifies that the dancer has been given permission to dance. Again, a dancer opening his or her right hand, facing it down while the left hand closed to make a fist shows he or she is acknowledging all the chiefs and elders present. The study revealed that when someone dances and puts his or her two hands at the back, it literally means “my hands has been tied to my back or I have no power to challenge the authorities. Besides, if a dancer dances and puts both palms together as if he or she is praying, it means he or she thinks all human beings are equal and so we should be one. Also, when the index fingers of both hands are joined when dancing, it symbolizes the need for togetherness. More so, putting the left palm into the right palm and raising them upward to the level of the mouth and blowing air onto the palm while dancing signifies that all the people present are nothing but chaff. All these movements and gestures were balanced and beautiful in the sense that the subtle manipulation of the hands, arms and the whole body were fanciful and fantastic. This attest to the fact that the kete dancers are much particular about the semiotics of symbolic gestures in the dance which enables observers understand them. The photographs in Figures 6, 7 and 8 are some of the examples of kete dancers.



Figure 6: A female kete dancer.



Figure 7: A female kete dancer



Figure 8: A male kete dancer

3.3. Drama

Drama which is a facet of performing art plays a major role in our day to day activities. These dramatic and creative acts are performed to fulfill the aesthetic cravings of the audiences during festival celebrations (Omoko,2016). When it comes to festivals celebrated in Ghana, drama runs through all the activities and this makes it beautiful and attractive. According to Long (n.d), drama is the way actors replicate an action at certain places for audiences to observe and comment about it. The drama seen in these festivals do not isolate itself but rather serves as a relevant input to its success. It was discovered that all the activities that go on in the course of the festivals studied were dramatic and follow systematic trend which was splendid. For instance, activities such as ritual performance at river *Suhyenso*, the procession of chiefs, queen mothers and elders to the festival grounds, a special rites performed at *Obourtabiri* and newly enstooled chiefs and queen mothers who are taught the traditions, customs, songs and how to put on their regalia are all in a form of drama. These dramatic scenes which are found in the festivals were not rehearsed as it is in drama

groups. The actions just come out in a natural flair and this makes onlookers feel either excited or perplexed. The study revealed that some of the dramatic scenes are not opened to the public. For instance, offering of libation at the *Obourtabiri* shrine, incantations which are made to enable a cock to enter the small hole and the special meal prepared at the shrine are all dramatic.

Another finding was that the way drums were played and how chiefs are carried in their palanquins are all dramatic and educate the people in the various communities.



Figure 12: A chief carried in a palanquin



Figure 9: Chiefs and their elders processing to the durbar grounds.



Figure 10: A chief carried in a palanquin



Figure 11: Fontonfrom drummers

3.4. Verbal Art

Verbal art is an aspect of performing art which is predominant in the festivals celebrated in Ghana. It was found in all the festivals observed that verbal arts form such as offering of libation, poetry recital (*anwensem*) and dirges are being performed. Respondents indicated that before the festivals celebrations begin, the chief priest of the various traditional areas offer libation to the gods and ancestors. According to the respondents, this is done to ask permission from these gods and ancestors before the commencement of the festival. It was observed that the chief priests who offer the libation, pick a bottle of schnapps, open it and pour some on the ground bit by bit and recite some words and example of such words are as follows:

Libation (*nsa guo*)

*Otwereduapon Kwame nsa, Asase yaa nsa,
 nananom nsamanfoɔ nsa, Asona abusua mo
 mmegye nsa yefrɛɛ mo awie yi a enye bɔne,
 moadaworoma na afe akɔ aporɔ asen abeto yen
 akwanhosen mu. Sedee afe biara yeyɛ no*

*afe yi nso yerehye fa-Akwantukeseɛ afahye. Yesre
 mo na moagyina yen akyi akyiginapa. Momma
 afahye no nye krabehwe, momma afahye no mfa
 mpontuo ne asomdweɛ mmra Dwaben foforo man
 mu, yesre abawoɔ, yesre nkwatenten, yesre nyasa,
 mindee enne koroye de ma*

*Dwaben man, ntiri Daasebre Oti Boateng ne
 n'atena nkonya*

*Onipa busuefoɔ a ɔmpɛ ɔman yi yie deɛ ne
 nkɔnkɔnmmɔ mmɔ ne tiri so. Dwabenman nkwa so,
 Daasebre ne na ntena nkoya mo nkwa so.*

Translation

Almighty God come for wine, earth goddess come for wine, ancestors come for your wine and the Asona clan come for wine. We have called you this afternoon because you have taken care of us throughout the year without any problem.

As you have been doing every year, let this year's festival

Become spectacular. We want development, good health peace and prosperity. Let us give birth, give us long life, give us wisdom and unity. Let Daasebre and his elders come together as one people. Punish any bad person who do not want New Juaben state progress. Long live New Juaben, Long live Daasebre and his elders.

The act of pouring the wine is artistic and Figures 13 and 14 show pictures of traditional priest offering libation whereas Figure 15 indicates a girl reciting a poem during the festival. Besides, poems which are being recited chronologically make the whole thing interesting and appealing. The reason is that the carefully selected words which is spoken in proverbial and poetic language expresses some emotions such as joy, grief and despair. It came to light that these verbal art forms arts are used to venerate and praise the ancestors and the gods for protecting them. Again, they are used to ask for blessing from the ancestral spirits, deities and also bring them close to the people. In affirming this, Nortey (2009) also mentioned that the libation offered during festival celebration enables the gods and ancestors draw near to the people and adhere to their plea.



Figure 13: Some traditional priests offering libation



Figure 14: Some traditional priests offering libation



Figure 15: A girl reciting a poem

4.DISCUSSIONS

The study revealed that all the festivals which were researched into have performing art forms as part of the festival's celebration. The performing art forms which were associated to the festivals express emotions and also educate people. It was also noticed that some of the dances performed during the festival celebration were unique with intricate gestures. This is similar to some festivals celebrated in Nigeria and this was ascertained by (Ngozi and Tabitha, 2014).

More so, the songs which were sung in all the festivals observed have special melodies and tunes that give a pleasing sound. Generally, it was established that the songs were sung by special trained people in the various communities where the festival are celebrated. Again, it was important to note that the costumes used in performing the dances during the festivals are distinctive and attractive. In affirming this, Asare (2014),

Akwetey(2007) and Owusu-Ansah(1993) indicated that people who dance *adowa* and *kete* during festivals put on exclusive costume which make them look gorgeous, beautiful and awe-inspiring.

Another result of the study was that the way chiefs were carried in palanquins during the festival celebrations, and also the variation of beats drums were all dramatic. This obviously indicate that the traditional festivals celebrated in Eastern Region exhibit the culture, traditions and the philosophies of the people. Besides, the performing art forms in the festival's celebrations educate both young and old people and also brings unity among community members.

More so, the research brought to the fore that all the performing art forms that take place in the course of the festival celebrations have philosophical and symbolical meanings to the people. This clearly means that the people who celebrate the various festivals in Eastern Region of Ghana have some beliefs and notions about the performing art forms that go on during festivals. The study revealed that dirges and libation offered during the festivals are used to remember their ancestors as well as venerating them.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The research unearthed the various performing art forms which go on in the traditional festivals in the Eastern Region of Ghana. The study indicates that traditional dances, drama, music, offering of libation and poetry recital in traditional festivals are relevant and educative in spite of the numerous contemporary performing art forms that go on in the Eastern Region.

Largely, the findings of the study reveal that the performing art forms in traditional festivals educate, entertain, console and even heal those who are emotionally unstable. More so, the study demonstrates that the performing art forms (dance, music, drama, offering of libation and poetry recitals) have philosophical and figurative meanings to the various societies. This shows that traditional festivals are very important and need to be organized properly to preserve the cultural heritage of the people. There is the need to establish cultural centres in the various communities in order to train people for the cultural troupes. The traditional cultural troupes' trainers can extend their training to students in

the various schools in the area as well as tourist and foreigners who attend these festivals.

This would help increase the income of the cultural troupe trainers and also preserve the traditions and culture of these areas for the future generations.

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