

# An Analysis of the Aboakyer Festival as Drama

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**Abstract-***This paper analyses Aboakyer Festival of the Effutu in the Central Region of Ghana from the dramatic or theatrical point of view. The paper discusses the two known myths surrounding the worship of the Winneba State god which led to the celebration of the Aboakyer Festival, the events and rituals involved in the celebration and analyses some dramatic elements that make the festival fit into what can generally be referred to as a theatrical performance. The main argument of this paper is that, the Aboakyer Festival is loaded with dramatic elements like audience/ performers' arena/ stage, songs, costume and drumming and dancing among others and can therefore be considered not only as a ritual but also as drama.*

**Keywords-** Drama; Aboakyer Festival; Theatre; Performance.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Festivals are ritual performances held in various traditional set ups which invariably form an integral part of the established customs and beliefs of a group of people. Festivals may be explained as public celebrations which are both joyful and commemorative in nature.

Festivals exist in different types and kinds but the one general feature is that the festival takes place once a year and it may last for one or several days. The celebration of festivals can also be educative because it serves as a source of vital information about the culture of a group of people. Again, festivals do have a social significance in that they bring togetherness among natives and also serve as homecoming events for natives, both home and abroad. A festival is an occasion of public manifestation of joy which can take the form of religious celebration during which sacrifices are offered to different gods. It is a set of activities and practices designed to celebrate, appreciate and honour deities and ancestors of the people of a particular community through ritual performance, celebrations or activities. In his write-up *Festivals in Nigeria*, Ekpenyong has observed:

Festivals are periodic reoccurring days or seasons of merry-making set aside by community, tribe, and clan, for the observance of sacred celebration, religious, solemnities or musical and traditional performance of social significance. (Ekpeyong, 1981:13).

According to Nketia "the traditional concept of a festival...is that of a communal celebration of life in which the members of a society participate on different levels in a number of structured and unstructured but significant events" (Nketia, J.H.K. 1975:34). Aba Hayford opines that, "the festival is a total dramatic form in which a people sees itself and its world reflected" (Hayford, 1975:27). Efua Sutherland observes that the festival is "an expression of

people living out their life concerns and involvements" (Sutherland, 1969:32). Finally, Caillios, like Nketia attaches a structural functionalist interpretation to the celebration of festivals. In his view:

It is by being reborn, by reinvigorating himself in his ever-present eternity, and in a fountain of youth with running water in which he has the chance to rejuvenate himself and to discover the plenitude and robustness of life that the celebrant will be able to brave a new circle of time. This is the function fulfilled by the celebrants (Caillios, 1995:107).

Indeed, the festival is the only institution which has the framework that can co-ordinate virtually all the artistic forms of a community.

## 2. THE ORIGIN/ HISTORY OF THE FESTIVAL

The *Aboakyer* or the deer hunt festival is celebrated annually on every first Saturday of May. It is a remembrance or a festival in honour and appreciation of *Penkye Otu*, the great god of Winneba and *Osim Pam*, the great warrior who led the Effutu through their migration to their present settlement. Oral tradition has it that Saturday is the festival day because after their migrations the Effutus are believed to have settled down on a Saturday. According to Effutu oral history, the people of Winneba have a migratory past, having journeyed since the 14th century to various places until they eventually settled at their current location, Simpa. This journey was supposedly led by the war god *Penkye Otu*, who protected the ethnic group from all dangers. In their bid to show their appreciation to their god, the people consulted the custodian of the god in order to find a proper sacrifice. In response the god asked for a human sacrifice, and of a royal for that matter. This command was adhered to for

some time. After some time, however, the human sacrifice became unacceptable among the royal family, so a lion was substituted upon consultation with the god. This too became problematic as the animal was supposed to be caught alive and with bare hands. It cost the lives of several others before the lion could be caught. Finally, a deer was agreed to be used.

There is another version which says that during the reign of Botsi Komfo Amu as *Omanhen* of Winneba State, he went to their national god Apa Selam (*Penkye Otu*) with a complaint which he presented in Effutu thus:

Nsa efur mba, ka ani mu nsa a,  
aba kyire ani ye ke fi anyinse

(Some white human beings have come, and if we kill a man for sacrifice, they shall catch us and put us in prison)

He therefore made an offer to the god thus:

Ani baa mu nantwi idu  
Na isa

(We shall give you ten and three cows.

To which the god replied thus)

M'ado (I shall not eat)

Then the *omanhen* said again:

Ani ba amu ito edu inyo

(We shall give you twenty sheep.

The god replied)

M'ado (I shall not eat)

The king then made further enquiries as to why the god refused his offer. The response from the god was that the offer was refused because the animals which they were substituting for a human being were unclean since the animals were rather domestic and therefore in constant contact with women who were defiled by menstrual fluids or the contamination of sexual intercourse. Upon this, the king asked the god to suggest a befitting animal. The god consequently demanded a live leopard. However, as the legend goes, when the people of Winneba went to catch the first leopard, the animal mauled eleven people, two of whom were brought back home alive but dying.

According to the legend, the god appeared to Botsi Komfo Amu in a trance, shaking with laughter. He then told the *Omanhen* "You demur to give me one man. Now I have had my fill of human blood with eleven men dead." It was after this encounter that the god asked the people of Winneba to bring him a deer caught alive and whole (Hagan, 2000:2). The *Aboakyer* festival is therefore celebrated to thank and honour their god *Penkye Otu* and *Osim Pam* their ancestor and warrior.

### 3. THE CELEBRATION OF ABOAKYER FESTIVAL

#### STAGE I

The first stage of the discussion is that, before its celebration there are a lot of consultations aimed at planning an effective celebration of the festival. (The consultations are carried out among the chiefs, elders and priestesses).

These stakeholders of the Effutu start their meetings about eight weeks before the festival is celebrated. These stakeholders, as mentioned above, are chiefs, elders, heads of individual *Asafo* companies who are called *supis* and the *osow* (priest). The meetings are held at the *Omanhen's* (paramount chief's) palace to strategize for the forthcoming festival. The Effutu, by sitting through such a meeting are re-enacting a past action laid down by their forebears. Again, what makes the procedure of the festival dramatic is the mode of the presentation, that is, the variations the Effutu give to each festival. Thus, even though the performance of one festival may be the same as another in its procedure, the variations involved in the presentations of one may be different from the other. An example of such variation is that even though there is a hunt every year the winner is always different. One other ritual is that after the first meeting, a Winneba district ban is placed on deer hunting and noise making. Examples of such noise-making activities are drumming, the playing of any electronic music and even church organs. It is worthy of note that violators of this ban are sent to the chief's palace where they are usually fined. The fine ranges from cash to foodstuffs, bottles of schnapps or even a sheep.

The essence of this quiet time, however, is for the elders to perform certain rituals which are vital to the festival. During this same period, there are secret meetings of smaller groups to rehearse the music and dance for the festival day. Such meetings are often held in the night and are always followed with street parties. It is noteworthy that the ban on noise-making is lifted two weeks before the festival when all necessary rituals have been performed. The ban on deer hunting, however, is not lifted until after the festival day, after the two groups have returned with their game.

On the eve of the festival which is always a Friday, both *asafo* companies go out to clear and prepare the paths leading to the forest. They do this by performing certain rituals believed to conquer potentially dangerous magical objects that might have been hidden by the opposing group.

#### STAGE II

The second stage of the discussion focuses on the deer hunt itself. A competitive deer hunt is organized between the two *asafo* companies of Winneba: *Tuafo* No.1 Company and *Dentsifo* No.2 Company. On the Festival day, which is a Saturday, all male members of both *asafo* companies gather as early as 3:00AM at the sea-shore and as purification rites for the hunt, they all bathe in the sea. The various groups led by their drummers, with gongong, rattles and bells proceed with *asafo* songs to the houses of their leaders where they purify themselves with special infusions which are prepared upon the recommendations of their gods. The belief is that, this ritual of purification will protect the hunters from injuries which may be sustained during the hunt. After this each group rushes into their respective hunting grounds to begin the hunt.

As soon as any company is sighted, its members and supporters in the waiting crowd begin to jump in jubilation and excitement. In the event of both companies appearing on the horizon, the race for the days becomes exhilarating. The animal which arrives first is placed at the feet of the *Omanhen* for him to inspect. After the chief has verified the physical condition of the animal, he steps on it three times with his right foot and three times with his left. This makes the first catch the approved animal for the sacrifice worthy of *Penkye Otu*. After this it is carried shoulder high amidst jubilation on a traditional route through the town. The deer is hailed by the town folks especially by members of the *Asafo* which caught it. After making much show of it, the deer is taken to the *Abosomma* (shrine) for other rituals to be performed. Then comes a general parade of the two *Asafo* companies in the afternoon. There is a procession of the chiefs and other leaders within the *Asafo* companies, with members dressed in colourful costumes. The *Tuafo* No.1 dress in blue and white while *Dentsifo* No.2 dress in red and yellow. This indeed gives Winneba a carnival atmosphere.

### STAGE III

This stage discusses rituals leading to the sacrifice of the deer. Upon the arrival of the deer at the shrine, libation is poured by the Priest. During this time, one executioner holds the head of the deer down, another holds its forelegs and a third, its hind legs. Then the Priest picks a special stone which he draws three times across the throat of the animal. The next prescribed step is for the chief executioner to pick a heavy piece of wood and land three heavy blows on the head. The belief is that on no account should the deer be carried to the grove in a conscious state. After the animal has been dazed, it is tied and carried to the grove of the Winneba state god *Penkye Otu*.

The sacrificial deer is not beheaded until Sunday, the next day. It is slaughtered by the chief executioner with a special knife. Then the Chief, state elders and some prominent people come around to witness as the deer is skinned and cut up into pieces. When the meat is cooked the chief Priest of *Otuano* comes to pick seventy-seven pieces with his bare hand, while the pot is still on fire. At the Winneba state grove, the chief Priest says a prayer and puts the pieces of meat in the receptacle in front of the god *Penkye Otu*, inside the grove. Even though this third stage does not form part of the pomp and pageantry of the festival it still constitutes a very important aspect of the celebration which is worth mentioning.

## 4. WHY ABOAKYER FESTIVAL CAN BE CONSIDERED AS DRAMATIC

In order for a piece of art to be considered as drama, certain dramatic elements should be present. Scholars including Ossie Enekwe, Obafemi, Nketia, Sutherland, and Okpewho among others agree that traditional African performances including festivals could be considered dramatic. They opine that such dramatic features include:

### 1. Performers

2. Audience
3. Costume
4. Drumming and Dancing
5. Arena/ stage

The work will continue with the discussion of these elements.

### Performers

The presence of performers or characters (actors) is important before any drama can take place; and indeed, the presence of the audience who will watch the performers is also crucial. The *Aboakyer* Festival of the Effutu is comparable to other forms of drama that are intended to be interpreted to an audience through performers. There is a range of performers who engage in various events that constitute the festival.

During the *Aboakyer* Festival, the chief or *Omanhen* is one of the Principal Performers. Before the festival day he presides over all the stakeholders' meetings. He is the chief host who welcomes dignitaries at various levels to the festival. It is his prerogative to give approval of the deer as a befitting sacrifice to the gods, and this he does by stepping three times on the deer with his right and then his left foot. Again, he leads all processions through the principal streets of Winneba. The chief Priestess and her team of Priests are also performers in the *Aboakyer* drama who play important roles. They offer prayers and perform libation at various stages of the celebration and also interpret the message of organizing and leading the hunt. The role of the members of the *Asafo* companies cannot be over emphasized. The males clear the paths for the hunt and engage in the hunt itself and the females cook for the males and are part of the jubilant singers both before and after the hunt.

### Audience

Audience in the *Aboakyer* Festival refers to the combination of the entire celebrants including the indigenes, tourists, journalists, worshipers, foreigners' researchers and everybody else who witnesses the performance of the festival.

As a matter of fact, the audience in the *Aboakyer* Festival are far from being idle spectators. The audience joins in the singing of festival songs and dance with the songs and drum beat. Since most of the events in the festival take place in the open, members of the community are attracted onto the streets, first as observers but soon become inspired to join in the action; thus, becoming active performers or participants.

### Arena/ Stage

Another important element that is present in *Aboakyer* Festival is arena or stage. According to Efua T. Sutherland "the venue of this drama is not a theatre building with a stage; it is the courtyard of a home or village shade tree or a route through a village or a town" (Sutherland, 1969: 84). In traditional celebrations, particularly festivals, the arena does not usually go beyond the traditional state of the people. The arena of *Aboakyer* Festivals is basically

Winneba. The various events in the festival occur at one place or the other in Winneba town or within the Winneba district. Indeed, specialized scenery is usually created for specific activities. For instance, the hunt takes place in the hunting grounds of *Asafo Tuafo* No.1 and *Asafo Dentsifo* No.2; both of which are located within Winneba town. Again, the durbar grounds which hosts the afternoon parade is also in Winneba and all the various processions take place on the principal streets of Winneba. The *abosomma* or shrine is in Winneba and *Penkye Otu*'s grove where the state god is fed is also situated in Winneba. All these stages or arenas are within the environs of the Winneba state, thus, making the festival look more like situational drama and providing the needed arenas for the performance of the rituals for the wholeness of the festival. The observation here is that there is no dichotomy between the stages and auditorium like Western theatre.

### **Costume and Make-up**

Costume and make-up of the performers in the *Aboakyer* Festival are realistic and are not only aimed at portraying the historical periods of the performances but also reflect the true characteristics of the cast.

Members and supporters of both *Asafo* companies adorn themselves in their identifiable colours. The *Asafo Tuafo* No.1 Company wears blue and white attires while *Asafo Dentsifo* No.2 Company wears red and yellow. The hunters maintain their *Asafo* colours but try to look like warriors. Some of them are bare chested, some wear headgears while others paint their faces and bodies. This appearance is for the morning session. During the afternoon activities, the hunters and members of the *Asafo* companies wear their traditional clothes and at this stage the use of jewelry is quite heavy. Some of the women wear their native hairstyle of plaited hair, *ntekua*. The mood of the people at this stage is generally that of gaiety and happiness.

The *Omanhen*, the sub chiefs and the elders are considered as the fathers for both *Asafo* companies. Therefore, they are not expected to dress in the colours of any of the groups; they have to remain neutral. In the morning of the festival, before the hunt takes place they dress in ordinary clothes with virtually no jewelry. Their mood could be described as prayerful and full of suspense as they hope and wait for a successful hunt.

For the afternoon session, the *Omanhen*, Queen mother and their team appear in full regalia; adorned with heavy gold ornaments around their necks, wrists, arms and heads. Indeed, the use of jewelry at this stage is very heavy.

For the priests (*osow*), their attire is the same for both morning and afternoon sessions. They wear white attires with white beads and necklaces which is symbolic of the purity and authority of *Penkye Otu*.

### **Drumming and Dancing**

In his essay entitled *French-Language Drama and the Oral Tradition: Trends and Issues*, John Conteh-Morgan says that music and dance "... are a supplement to dialogue and contribute to dramatic action" (John Conteh

Morgan, 1992: 119-120). Drumming, singing and dancing are elements that feature prominently in the *Aboakyer* festival. Interviews with the *supis* of both companies revealed that the drum, *Kyen Kofi* is beaten anytime there is the need to summon their members for a meeting. Similarly, their festival has several events that include drumming. In any given African community drums are powerful means of communication and the *Aboakyer* festival milieu /context is no exception. During *Aboakyer* drums can be used to praise, abuse or warn. On the eve of the festival the members of both *Asafo* companies have to go out to clear and prepare the paths leading to the forest. It is the drum that is beaten to notify and gather members; still on the eve of the festival various activities are done to keep vigil. One of such activities is drumming and dancing for the natives just to stay awake and keep the community in a jubilant mood. At dawn on the festival day it is the drum that is beaten to summon the hunters for the hunt and also to inform the Winneba town about the hunt; thus, inform the Effutu about the start of the festival.

Again, on the festival day, as the town folks await the arrival of the deer, they occupy themselves with singing, dancing and drumming. This is where they sing their war songs and tease each other. Dance may be explained as one of the physical aspects of the festival which involves both the performer and the audience. Indeed, it is the physical participation in the celebration as people dance to the rhythm of the music. Then also at the durbar grounds various folklore groups perform to entertain the crowd including natives and guests to await the arrival of the deer. The act of singing, drumming and dancing is even intensified upon the arrival of the deer as the winning team jeers at the losers. At this stage all the various religious and cultural groups present, dance to the rhythm of the songs and drum beat. There is the belief that drumming takes place during the festival because the beating of drums serves as a link between the living and the ancestors whom the drummer is inviting to participate in the festival. All the processions which take place as part of the celebration are accompanied by drumming, singing and dancing. During these processions through the Winneba town, the beating of *Kyen Kofi* and other drums is believed to have the potency of warding off evil forces and at the same time entertain the people. Drums are used during virtually all the activities that make up the *Aboakyer* festival; indeed, drums accompany all songs which the hunters and populace sing during the festival. The roles played by drumming at the festival grounds indicates its significance in the entire festival.

### **Plot / procedural**

The celebration of the *Aboakyer* Festival follows some laid down procedures put in place by tradition. The festival day itself is the first Saturday of May. However, there are certain activities which must take place before and after the festival day. Before its celebration there are a lot of consultations aimed at planning an effective celebration of the festival. These consultations go on among the

stakeholders who are the chiefs, elders, heads of individual *Asafo* companies and the Priests. They start their meetings about eight weeks before the festival day. The meetings which are held at the paramount chief's palace are meant to strategize for the upcoming festival. On the festival day the activities follow one another. There is the hunt in the morning, then the afternoon parade to welcome the hunters with the deer. This takes the form of a *durbar* where the *Omanhen* as the chief host, welcomes and addresses dignitaries as well as indigenes and tourists.

The deer is then taken to the shrine for some rituals prior to its slaughter. This is followed by the procession through the principal streets of Winneba by members of the two *Asafo* companies. The group that made the first catch leads the procession while the losers follow; both groups adorn themselves in their identifiable colours. Behind the *Asafo* come the invited chiefs and the *Omanhen* riding in a palanquin. The women of both companies dance alongside with drums and tambourines.

## 5. CONCLUSION

*Aboakyer* Festival could be seen as a piece of drama. Indeed, it is a stage set and the celebrants as actors with various roles, such performance is imbued with peculiar stylistics including performers, audience, costume, drumming and dancing, as well as arena or stage, which could merit considering the entire celebration as drama.

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