

ART: The Pivot of Ghanaian Festivals

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Abstract



This paper examines the roles that art plays in the various aspects of festival celebrations that occur among various societies in Ghana. The paper identifies and analyses the prospects in importance of art as a justification for the celebration of contemporary festivals in Ghana. In discussing the paper, some attempts have been made to examine art as a nucleus of culture and how art constitutes the vehicular body by which traditions are transmitted from generation to generation. This is based on the fact that the concept of art as reflected in Ghanaian cultural festivals, revealed what art is and why its infusion in festival celebrations in Ghana. The authors therefore, argued that art is a dynamic and adoptable product which has a socio-cultural heritage component, and that is why art is a major component in the celebration of festivals and it performs both sacred and secular roles in the traditional festivals.

Introduction

In African society of Ghana, traditional festivals and other practices are held in high esteem. It is through them that the true Ghanaian or African personality is portrayed. In Ghanaian cultural festivals, art is a dominant link to the people's ways of life. In the light of this, the National Commission on Culture (2004) posit that culture is evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenges of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic, and religious norms and modes of organisation; thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours. Ghanaian festivals are colourful and vibrant event which bring together families, clans

and all ethnic groups in communities. Festivals are a part of a culture that celebrates all the rites of passage in life as well as annual and seasonal events. Ceremonies organized for festivals are vital organs for the transmission of the culture of the people. Vasina (1984) opines that culture is not fashioned out of art; but art is created to reflect the activities, objects, and the lifestyle of the society. The truth is that in Ghana's cultures, the art is virtually inseparable.

In this paper, we examine and explain the concept of festivals in Ghana, the concept of art, the role of art in festival celebrations.

The Concept of Festivals

The organisation of social life in traditional societies gave a special place to festivals. The word festival is derived from a Latin word "festivus" meaning a feast, joyous, or mirthful. According to Compton's pictured Encyclopaedia (1968), festivals have been celebrated since the ancient times. Getz (2005) defined festival as public celebrations. In Ghana, the word festival means a joyous ceremony, characterised by pomp and pageantry for the celebration of important cultural events. To most Ghanaians, a festival is that chain of activities, celebrations, ceremonies, and rituals which mark the continuity of culture in an environment. These festivals occur at appointed times in the lunar calendar and mark the rhythm of life (Ghananation.com, 2009). The young and old eagerly await such festivals, when demonstration of socio-cultural events and artistic skills are expressed. Earliest festivals seem to have been connected with offerings to the dead. Traditionally, festivals were enacted as a way of remembering ancestors to celebrate victories over dangerous animals, to worship the gods and the deities, and to venerate their spirit of the dead. In modern Ghana, festivals are celebrated to mark the union of the best artistic expression for the collective renewal of the arts as a form of community experience, unity and strength, encompasses the people's artistic works-performing, sonic, visual and their full participation in cultural activities. Different types of festivals are celebrated in the Ghanaian society to mark such historical seasons as the 'ohum' (name of a spirit) celebrated by the Akyem; 'dwira' (purification) by the Akwapem; 'bakatue' (opening of lagoon) by the Edena; 'akwambo' (path-clearing) by the Gomoa, Ajumako, Ekumfi and Agona; 'aboakyer' (deer hunting) by the Effutu; 'homowo' (hooting at hunger) by the Ga; 'kotoklo' and 'nmayen' (eating millet) by the Krobo; 'agbeliza' (honouring cassava) by the Avenor; hogbetsotso (migration) by the Anlo; and 'damba' (birth and naming of the Prophet Mohammed) by the Dagomba and Mamprusi.

Every festival presents a unique attribute that distinguishes it from the other, such as creating room for the renewal of friendship, and fraternizing with relations. At these festivals, as observed by Mbiti (1975), festivals such as the harvesting of yams, for example, prayers and incantations are said on behalf of the celebrating groups, homage paid to the departed and the spirits of the dead invited to participate in the merry making. Turner (1971) also agrees that prayers pre-dominate most festivals in Africa. Special oblations and sacrifices are also part of the ceremonies. But perhaps the important role of traditional festivals is that it provides opportunities for the collective renewal of the arts as a form of community experience. The importance of it is that several ways: it teaches the people know about their history; acts as means of communicating with the ancestral spirits, reuniting family members; assessing the efficiency of their leaders; hip a platform for the display of the wealth of the culture; and it promote good citizenry.

Mbiti (1975) stresses that such artistic talents carefully be utilized through visual performance and the verbal arts. Festivals are, therefore, perhaps the country's richest and most significant means for the expression of art forms. Cole (1975) terms festivals as a platform for the display of total works art of the people.

Concepts of Art

Art has meant different things to different people at different times. The term as used today, has therefore, been defined differently by many scholars. For instance, Dei-Anang (1964) as cited in Kemevor (2004) explained art as the expression of spiritual excellence in a form in which it can be physically enjoyed. Art is not merely a decorative enhancement of our lives, but a sign of our desire to live in the world fully and honestly (Zwicky, 2007). This is supported by Osotsi (2002) who believes that any definition that reduces art to tangible objects is not very useful for those experiences that are not easily reducible to objects.

Others define art as the spontaneous overflow of inner feelings which are expressed in a medium (Hickman, 2005). Therefore, art could be viewed as an instrument to arouse certain emotions, or to play a certain social role. However, art is somewhat defined through its usefulness, function, and the role it plays in the affairs of everyday life of a society. Thus art is inseparable from life. Art is, of course, a cultural expression and every culture decides for itself what art is or is not (Merriam, 1964; Blacking, 1976). One social characteristic of art is that it is functionally integral with life and rhythms of life.

It is therefore, noted that the arts (visual, performing and sonic) which are part of the activities in the festivals significantly do aid the celebration's aesthetic enjoyment and understanding of the symbolic meanings through which the people express their feelings, ideas, beliefs, as well as demonstrate their dignity and wealth. Hence, the arts in the festivals are both a body of knowledge and a series of activities designed to meet specific goals. The visual art forms perceived by sense of touch, and routinely seen in festivals are sculptures, textiles, beads, body decoration and architecture.

In a wider context of festivals, the performing arts constitute another aspect of media avenue for the expression of the aesthetics of festivals. The performing arts perceived by the senses of hearing, seeing, kinaesthetic, and performed rather than made, are best discovered during their active exhibition at festivals.

The creation of the art has to do with the organisation of elements guided by principles of design. The elements and principles together constitute the visual qualities in art forms. A well organised visual quality (ingredients) (in art forms) enhances the aesthetic qualities of the arts in the celebration of festivals.

The Role of the Arts in Festivals and the Processes

During festivals of the old societies in Ghana, an art form in its cultural context offered corresponding understanding of the art form or product itself and a valuable insight into the way of life of the people who produced it. In many instances, the function of the arts is to reinforce beliefs, customs and values within a society. The arts help to create an atmosphere for the successful transmission of information that are significant to culture. The Arts as reflected in festivals, have some processes:

- **The Procession:** The festival activities begin with a procession, which is itself an art of orderly design. The order of arrangement in the procession to the durbar ground for example is artform that entails design and orderliness. The paramount chief and the divisional chiefs and the entire entourage in the procession dance and gesticulate, becoming, and in turn becoming art forms themselves or art in motion. Multitudes of objects, dances, skits and sacrificial offering transform a once-quiet space into an arena of colour, sound and motion.

The hierarchical structure of the procession creates an impression of balance, order and unity. In the lead are the executioners in the following order, the sling drummer, staff bearers, stool carrier, costumed court attendants girls, horn blowers, the chief, drummers, female praise singers and crowds. This could be considered as a rhythm by progression. At the durbar ground, basically, the sitting pattern of the chief and his entourage conforms to a 'U' shape formation with the chief in the middle, flanked respectfully on left and right by two divisional chiefs and drummers. Unity created by continuity is obtained. It is a sight to observe how, the assemblage of the colourful royal regalia, the drums, costuming of the crowd, stately drapery of the chief, the ceremonial vessels and the banners and buntings converge to create an artistic splendour at the durbar grounds during festivals.

The chiefs' umbrellas viewed from a distance are a display of patches of bright colours within a mass of burnt sienna. In some cases, chiefs are sheltered under umbrellas when performing libation. These umbrellas act as canopies to shield chiefs from the scorching sun. It is also a symbol of the chief's office. There are generally two types of royal umbrellas distinguishable by their design to differentiate rank of chiefs. For instance, paramount chiefs are sheltered under a two-tiered umbrella, while divisional chiefs use single-tiered type. Most of these umbrellas are highly decorated symbolically in gold leaf. Royal umbrellas are identified by specific emblems surmounted on top which reflect the characteristic nature of the specific chief or illustrate a maxim. Most of the finials are representations, symbols or pictorials of animate and inanimate objects whose meanings are proverbial. For instance, an illustration of a bird, with the head turned backwards symbolises the fact that the chief sees and knows everything around him.

- **Communication:** On the durbar grounds, chiefs communicate through their linguists whose badges of office are the staffs. Linguist staff symbols vary with each clan. The nature of the symbol also depends on the attitudes and general outlook to life of the clan. Most of the distinctive among the Ewe, Ga, Fanti and Asante are the forefinger of the hand pointing upwards, the hand holding an egg, the chameleon, and the eagle. The hand with the forefinger pointing up is an indication that there is no one superior to the chief in the state, except God. This means that the chief is the supreme authority of the state and that only God is superior.

Another significant art of the celebration of festivals is the verbal art of libation. Libation is the means by which Ghanaians contact the spiritual world. In essence, it is an act of pouring palm-wine or choice liquor on the ground. Ladzagla (1980) stressed that

through libation the belief in spiritual beings and a sense of dependence on these beings are strengthened. When libation is performed the spirits of our ancestors are accorded reverence, but not worshipped as erroneously assumed. The choice of language, eloquence of expression and delivery, combine to evoke deep emotional feeling. The splash of the liquor poured on the ground also communicates with the living to confirm or otherwise whether the libation has been accepted.

During the Bakatue festival of the people of Edena for example, fishermen display decorative symbols in design motifs either carved or painted on the sides of their canoes. These designs portray the beliefs and aspirations of the fisher folks and are mode of communication. An elephant motif also symbolises the greatness of the particular fishing communities that own the canoes. At times some symbolic motifs are used to decorate state swords artistically because they are ceremonial swords meant to signify the social strength of the clan, or state. The sword bearers use them to shield the chief and control the distance between the chief and the crowd. Part of the communication value of the festivities is the visual ornamentation of the drums and costumes. Drums that are decorated with the human skulls and bones signify the determination to defend the state.

Drums in the festivals provide music whose rhythm and harmony are made manifest during drumming and dancing. The artistic appreciation of drumming and dancing lies in their arrangements, whereby the drums and drummers are positioned opposite the dancers to create a spacious arena for displaying skills.

The drummer and horn blower engage in a call-and-response duet. The 'atumpan' (talking drum) during this occasion is used to recount history of the stool, to eulogize the patron gods, the chiefs, the ancestral heroes, heroines and state/clan guiding spirits, to welcome distinguished guests and summon the paramount chief to address an audience. The language of the drum occasionally could be played to advise, caution, or instruct a chief on etiquette or comportment.

- **Colour Symbolism:** To Ghanaians, the beauty of a colour does not lie only in its visual value but also in its symbolic function (Akwetey, 2007). For instance, the wearing of white clothes and the application of clay on the arms and forehead are expressions of joy for the success of the occasion. The Akan, Ewe and Ga decorate their chiefs in gold ornaments and predominantly yellow 'kente'/'kete' clothes to symbolise prosperity, royalty, power, kingship, wealth and long life. Green and white are Ga Homowo colours that signify bountiful harvest. Green patterns

decorate the body as signs of rejoicing over the year's harvest. Red symbolises occasions of melancholy, death, an act of war, and national crisis (Kentecloth.com, 2010). Antubam (1963) noted that colours symbolize spiritual, deep feelings of melancholy, peace, joy, kingship, wealth and fertility, particularly among the Akan. Chiefs, also wear multi-coloured cloths; golden headgears, footwear, and jewellery as manifestation of their wealth and in the belief that they would be protected against evil spirits and enemies. It is believed that the bangles that are worn are provided with hollow spaces, which are filled with poison before going to the battle field. When defeat or capture is imminent, they would rather bite into the poisoned bangle to take their own lives than be taken captives or surrender (Torgo, 2009). The varied hues in the headgears of the women especially the reds and whites, the golden finials of the spokespersons' staffs and the dark brown colour of the cover of the "talking" (atumpan) drums as well as the intriguing display of the ornamental bead decorations of young girls; and the women add spectacular glamour to the colourful durbar.

- **Body Decoration:** The Akan, Ewe and Ga, women and teenagers decorate their bodies in circular and linear designs that bear historical meanings, hold religious and cultural values, connote ethnic identities, and provide medicinal function. Apart from being symbolic designs that portray feminine attributes, those of the Ga contain herbs that act as protective body lotion against the hot sun.

Aesthetically appealing hair styles decorated with gold-pins jewellery of the most intricate designs are worn by both participants and observers. Women wear beads around the anklets and wrists with the belief of developing shapely form/physique. Really, there are a lot to learn from these arts in motion (Torgbi Torgbo III, 2009).

For contemporary festivals, these items and experiences deriving from art and culture presented as performance become aesthetically configured and heightened modes of communication showcased for audience other than the traditional owners of the arts and culture.

Purposes of the Arts

There are purposes for using art forms. These purposes change in importance with time and content. From the discussions so far, the writers would like to deduce and stress that, the purposes of the most common arts in the festivals are functional, symbolic, relating to everyday life, documenting and educating. The functionality of art in the festivals is that each object has specific purposes. The object may encourage social relationship and communication; it may convey power, status and wealth.

The need to express the essential things of life gives rise to symbolism. Most shapes, colours, and ideas are symbolic. Apart from the aesthetic and excellence portrayed by the artefacts, symbolism inherent in them serves as a 'written document' whereby historical facts pertaining or relating to the social, political, religious, philosophical values and beliefs of the people are kept for posterity. The arts being integrated with everyday life are used to secure and continue the spiritual and physical welfare of the community. They reflect the struggles and aspirations of the people primarily through sounds and images. The arts express the culture of the people. The young people of the society are introduced to the cultural activities through the arts.

Martins (1989) posits that artist's efforts are directed towards touching life through specific experiences. The artist produces, formulates, entertains, communicates, and fulfils the human yearning for aesthetics. Martins again states that art is not, however merely a means of reliving the past; its relationship with the past is to give focus, drawing out of the haphazard miscellany which constitutes one's background. It is explicitly evident that a clearly defined body of experiences seen now, under the artist's stimulus, belonged to an isolated period gone by, but which has been given meaning to in the present. This is the thesis of African people in relation to the arts.

The implications of art as a pivot of Ghanaian festivals is that the youth observing all these art forms at durbars of the various ethnic festivals would be well educated in the various artistic aspects of their festivals and the cultural elements that are already incorporated into the school curriculum which embraces cultural studies as an important aspect of the education of the youth to enhance their knowledge and appreciation of the values of the culture and tradition of Ghana.

Conclusion

In Ghana, the plethora of traditional expressive arts, have within their expressions a certain idiom of communication which constitutes what was described as a cultural identity and underscores the use of proverbial language.

It is important to note that art plays a significant role in festivals, in people's social life and day to day activities of Ghanaians, and Africans in general. Looking at the various uses of art especially during festivals, it is quite clear that Ghanaian societies cannot afford to overlook the importance of art. The functional roles of art in Ghanaian festivals depict ethnic achievements in technology, communication, artistic production, and aesthetic consciousness.

The world is fast becoming a global village and there is so much the curriculum makes pupils or students value the role of art and to make them propagate, promote and disseminate our arts and culture through festivals. This can also help in building bridges between the various ethnic groups to promote the uniqueness of the Ghanaian culture. The effect of festivals on children cannot be neglected. Their participation in the initiation ceremony will definitely enhance their desire to search into the importance of the festivals and get to understand and accept the history of their tradition. A visit to preserved places of historical importance such as Royal Mausoleum and exhibition of relics of local heroes should be organised in the interest of the public during the festival to accentuate the history of the old, which would be quite interesting and entertaining.

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