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<https://jaac-sca.org>

ISSN 2637-3610

Volume 3 Issue 1

March 31, 2019

## Symbolic Significance of Enyan Abaasa Asafo Flags

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**Citation:** Abban, E. (2019). Symbolic significance of Enyan Abaasa Asafo flags. *Journal of African Arts & Culture*, 3(1), 41-58.

### Abstract



Images on Asafo flags are normally allegoric representation of proverbs, metaphors, maxims and traditions associated with the cultures of the Akans. This study employed descriptive and analytical methods. An inquiry-discovery, oral interviews and questionnaires were employed to bring to bear some of the hidden Asafo flags and their philosophical representations. It was revealed that most of the youths did not associate themselves with the Asafo groups because of religious beliefs they lack the philosophical meanings of most of the symbols used in the various Asafo flags. This has negatively affected the sustenance, promotion, and transmission of Asafo activities from one generation to another making the youths of today lack various ethics, cultural values of our societies. It has therefore become imperative now to explore into the philosophical interpretations of Asafo flags for documentation and referencing.

**Keywords:** Asafo, Asafo flags, philosophical interpretation, symbolism, youth

## Introduction

Ghana lies at the West coast of Africa, sharing its southern boundaries with the Gulf of Guinea. The country is divided into various ethnic groups, largest among them being the Akans. The Akans occupy areas stretching from the Brong Ahafo Region through Ashanti Region, parts of Western and the Eastern Regions to the Central Region. The languages spoken by the Akans are Twi, Fante, Nzema and Bono. Twi is popularly spoken in Brong Ahafo, Ashanti, parts of Eastern, Western and Central Regions. Fante is spoken in Western and Central Regions. The Fantes in the Central Regions are also made up of different ethnic groups, some of which are the Abrems, Eguafos, Aboras, Ekumfis, Gomoas, Agonas, Guans, Ajumakos and the Enyans.

The Fantes and for that matter the Enyans have a traditional militant organisation called Asafo. The name Asafo is made up of two distinct words, *Sa* which means war or path and *Fo* which literally means people. So, *Asafo* means people who go to war, likewise warlike people or people who clear paths. In the olden days, the Asafo Company performed the functions of protecting and guiding towns and villages against enemy attacks, wild animals and clearing of paths. Besides clearing of paths, it was their responsibility to defend or attack any opposing groups. Likewise, they also went to forests to search for any wild animal that was terrorising the towns and villages and killed it, or searched for missing persons. They also assisted in conveying of corpses to their destinations, carrying sick persons and pregnant women to the nearest fetish priests or priestesses for medical attentions. The duties of Asafo companies were many.

In recent times, however, the Asafo companies perform social and cultural functions during festivals, durbar of chiefs, state functions, funerals and so on. Almost every Fante town or village has Asafo Company. Like any other organisation, the Asafo Company constituted varied personalities charged with different responsibilities.

There is the Asafo chief called *Supi*. The sub-chiefs called *Asafohemfo* support the *Supi*. As a symbol of authority, the *Supi* carries a sword in his hand and the sub chiefs hold a special set of flexible rods or whip. These are prepared from the leather of a horse. The *Asafohemfo* also carry whisks, *Bodua*, a fluffy hairy tail obtained from the horse. The *Bodua* is used to perform spiritual functions.

The *Frankaanyi* or the flag bearer is one of the most significant personalities in the Asafo Company. He carries the Asafo flags and leads the Asafo Company in all its adventures. There is the *Okyerema* who is the leading sacred drummer. He plays the leading drum to encourage, motivate, and push the members forward during manoeuvres. The presence of the *Okyerema* contributes significantly towards the success or failure of any

adventure embarked upon by the Asafo Company. Under the *Okyerema* are players of the other Asafo drums, musical instruments and singers. Normally, the drum players numbered from five to eight but the singers who also constitute the military force are as many as those willing to join.

It is believed that aside all these people is the omnipotent God, gods and the ancestors of the community who provide spiritual protection, unity, and strength to ensure the success of any task embarked upon by the Asafo Company. A typical Asafo flag has some significant features on them such as the "British union jack" or the Ghanaian national flag, which is situated at the left or right corners of the flag. The central field is used for applying symbolic and allegorical parable features mirrored front and back in the center of the cloth with templates. These images on the flags are normally allegoric representation of proverbs, metaphors, maxims and traditions associated with the cultures of the Fantes, which were traditionally handed down orally.

The Asafo flag is used to perform social, moral, spiritual and cultural functions. Besides serving as a symbol of authority and identity, it also preserves memories of significant events that the Asafo Company has passed through. It creates pride and belongingness to a particular group or society. It also governs and orders the direction of the different groups or societies. Unfortunately, majority of the youths of today, especially those of Enyan Abaasa traditional area, are less knowledgeable about the significance of the Asafo flags let alone their philosophical meanings and symbolism. While the youths of this generation appreciate much of foreign cultures, they seem to know little of their own culture, especially those portrayed by Asafo flags. In this way, much of the cultural values are being lost. If care is not taken, Ghanaians especially the Akan youth will fall into cultural enslavement in Asafo and its activities eventually. This study, therefore, seeks to identify types and functions of the traditional Asafo flags used by the Asafo companies of Enyan Abaasa traditional area. It also inquires into the sources of ideas of Asafo flags and find out their philosophical interpretations as well as the extent of education of the youths on the traditional Asafo flags and their ability to interpret them.

## **Review of Related Literature**

Abaasa Asafo flags might have similar characteristics as those of the other communities, yet their symbolism and philosophical interpretations differ significantly. They also constitute a formidable source of information, which needs to be tapped for the education of the youths on cultural values. Arhin (1966) believes that the European military and the Asafo were connected in various ways. According to Wartemberg (1950 p. 53), 'during the wars between the Fantes and Asantes, the able-bodied men in the towns and villages of Elmina were organized, with the assistance of the Dutch, into

military groupings which became known as Asafo companies, for the defence of civic interests'. Arhin (1966), states that the Asafo companies on the coast might have had their origin in the armed retailers who gathered around certain merchants for protection and security in the uncertain period of the slave trade. The Asafo companies adopted other European military practices, including the firing of musketry, the numbering and naming of companies, and the use of distinctive flags, many of the older ones, which bear the British Union Jack. Supporting the opinion that Asafo existed before the Europeans, Arhin posits that his grandfather, E. J. P. Brown, was a former magistrate of Cape Coast and Asafo scholar.

The colours of their headdress and hairstyles, special drums, horns and other musical instruments, designation, and emblems differentiate Asafo companies. Automatically, one becomes a member based on the patrilineal system. On the contrary, Brown, (2005) expatiates by saying that there are conflicting statements about the origin of *Asafo*. One school of thought claims that the European presence in Gold Coast influenced the formation of the Asafo groups and others claim that it existed before because of inter-ethnic fighting among Akan groups, especially between the Asantes and Fantes.

The Smithsonian Institute, (1992) confirms this view by stating that the origin of Asafo flags is open to speculations and that Flag traditions existed among African peoples long before European contact. Flags have been documented, for example, in early kingdoms of Western Sudan regions as Ghana and Mali empires A.D 800-1200 and A.D 1200-1500 respectively. European travellers in the Gold Coast observed flags of local Akan design more than three hundred years ago. The Asafo oral tradition asserts that the Asafo flag is an original part of their paraphernalia. Cole and Ross (1977) confirmed that the origin of Asafo flags is not documented, but various companies believe that the flag was an original element of their paraphernalia.

The Fante Asafo flags are mostly constructed in rectangular shapes with varied dimensions in terms of its height and width. They are mostly made of differing colours with sewn appliques of plants, animals and objects. At the right corners of the flags are either embossed or sewn British union jack flag or the Ghanaian national flag. The flags are decorated at its borders with geometric shape designs and frays at its edges. According to Edusei, (1981), there are two forms of *Asafo* flags. The first, which is not common and is rarely shown in public except on very special occasions, is about 300 feet in length and about four feet wide and because of its great length, it is usually displayed on walls of tall houses in the town or village. Sometimes, a number of Asafo members carry it in a serpentine procession. Because of its length, it is likened to a stream.

It is, therefore, appropriately named in Fante as *nsuansu* (stream) or *twuwii* (dragnet). Since Asafo flags carry narrative images, which can be offensive to rivals, the *nsuansu* or the *twuwii* has room for a lot more images. Thus, it carries more offensive imagery than its smaller counterpart known as the *frankaa*. The second form of Asafo flag known as the Frankaa, according to Edusei (1981) is by far commoner and more popular of the Fante Asafo flags. Its length is about six feet with a breadth of four feet.

## Methodology

This study adapted the descriptive and analytical methods of qualitative research. These methods enabled the researcher to identify and describe different kinds of Enyan Abaasa Asafo flags and their philosophical meanings, to establish their effects on the lives of the people in the community, especially the youths. The participants for this study consisted of *Asafo Supis*, *Asafohenfo*, Flag Bearers, staunch members and some *Asafo* flags were sampled. Purposive sampling method was used to collect information from the population in such that the knowledge gained is a true representative of the total population under study. The sample consist of two (2) *Asafo Supis*, sixteen (4) *Asafohemfo*, two (3) flag bearers, ten (10) staunch members and fourteen (14) *Asafo* flags were sampled. An unstructured interview and participant observation were used to collect data from the *Supis*, Chiefs, Flag Bearers and some staunch members including the Youth. The researcher found out that interviews and observation were more appropriate because most of the interviewees and respondents were illiterate in reading or writing in English. Data collected through interviews and observations in the form of field notes were transcribed and analysed in descriptive and narrative forms. All these were done towards reaching conclusions to give a fair idea of the situation on the ground concerning the activities of the *Asafo* companies, philosophical meaning of the *Asafo* flags and the implication of these on the lives of the people of *Abaasa* especially, and the youths.

## Results and Discussion

There are two *Asafo* Companies at *Enyan Abaasa* community. They are the *Dentsefo* or *Kyeremfo* (No 1) and *Tuafo* or *Etsiwafo* (No 2) companies. Each *Asafo* company has a number of flags, which reflect issues on socio-cultural values and achievements of the *Asafo* companies in particular and the community in general. These issues or values are stated in proverbs or wise sayings. Proverbs are carefully selected words or phrases that inspires, educate and make one uses the senses fully before embarking on any adventure. Proverbs are gathered from the values of the people, social setting and spoken words through communication and life experiences. Some *Asafo* flags were

selected from the No.1 and No.2 Asafo companies of Enyan Abaasa traditional area. These flags have been literally described, analysed and philosophically interpreted. The titles of the flags are stated in Akan (Fante) language.



*Figure 1: Ɔsebo roko nsutae ho*

The proverb is literally interpreted as 'the lion is approaching the banks of a pond.' The lion (Ɔsebo) is one of the most fearful animals living in the jungle. The lion is most often referred to as king of the jungle, which most animals fear. The pond (nsutae) is stagnant water in the forest where all animals go to drink water every day. It so happens that whenever the other animals, especially the weaker ones hear of the approach of the lion to the pond, there is great fear and they all flee for their lives.

As seen in the flag (Figure 1) there is a pond and the lion is approaching it. The flag belongs to the Tuafo (No.2) Asafo Company of Enyan Abaasa. The interpretation of the flag is that whenever the Tuafo (No.2) embarks on any adventure, other Asafo companies especially the opposing groups from the nearby towns and villages fear to stand in their way. They panic. The flag is a symbol of courage, bravery and domination. It teaches the people to be brave in life and not to allow anything to become a stumbling block. On the other hand the interpretation could also be that if there is something one should fear, one should not take any chances or risks. To the No.2 Asafo Company, opponents run away on hearing of their approach.



*Figure 2: Ɔkofotakyi, Ɔno na Ɔremen nam a, osi no dua*

The literal translation is Ɔkofotakyi swallows the fish from its tail! Ɔkofotakyi is a giant bird with a very big, long beak. The fish is a creature that lives in water. It is used to prepare meals. The fish has fins that contain tiny sharp bones which are used to swim. It also has scales all over its body. The tail fins and scales point backwards from the head towards the tail. It is really difficult, almost impossible for anyone to swallow the fish from the tail towards the head without getting the scales and bones in the tail and fins scratching and wounding the throat. But that is the challenge Ɔkofotakyi prefers. In this context Ɔkofotakyi refers to a fearless warrior.

As seen in the flag (Figure 2), Ɔkofotakyi is seen swallowing the fish from the tail despite the danger the scales and the bones in the fins will scratch its throat and wound it. The flag belongs to the Tuafo No.2 Company. It symbolises that the Tuafo No.2 Asafo Company is ready to face all challenges squarely, no matter the outcome. The flag is a symbol of bravery, determination and perseverance. It teaches that one should be ready to face problems squarely, no matter the magnitude and consequence.



Figure 3: *Sɛ w'anyi haw abɛketseawa a, ebrɛ no bu*

The proverb literally translate as 'If you underrate the young palm tree, you suffer when felling it'. Both the young and the matured palm trees are usually felled and tapped for palm wine. It is a well-known fact that the felling of both young and matured palm trees is equally a difficult task. However some people underrate the difficulty in felling the young palm tree. They think it is easier felling the young palm tree than the matured one.

The flag (Figure 3) shows supposedly young palm tree and a man holding an axe with the intention of felling it. There is another stand by observer probably the *Asafohen*, pointing to the palm tree. The flag is owned by the Dentsefo (No.1) Asafo Company of Enyan Abaasa. The philosophy behind the flag is that no task is ever easy. One should not judge or underrate issues or thing by the mere physical appearance. The flag teaches against laziness which breeds contempt.





Figure 4: *Rokɔ ɔko a, wɔdze etudur ko*

The proverb literally translates as ‘War is fought with ammunition’. The history behind this wise saying is that, in the olden days, the Asafo companies went to war with a type of locally manufactured gun, which shoots with gun powder (*etudur*). Without the gun powder the gun cannot fire and therefore one cannot fight to win the war.

This wise saying is likened to the biblical story of the ten women who were to attend a midnight wedding. Five of them missed the wedding when bridegroom arrived because they failed to fill their lamps with oil. The flag (Figure 4) shows the *Safohen* holding the traditional sword of authority and a man, probably one of his warriors carrying a keg of gunpowder. There is another person standing behind the *Safohen* who is barehanded.

The wise saying expresses the need for adequate preparation before going to war or when embarking on any adventure. Another wise saying similar to this is that ‘the army does not move on an empty stomach’. The flag belongs to the Tuafo (No.2) *Asafo* Company of Enyan Abaasa.



Figure 5: *Abofra rusuasua otu tow a, otow apatabi na onntow eko*

The literal translation of the proverb is 'A child learns how to hunt by shooting the squirrel and not the antler'. The antler is a big male deer with branched horns. It will be difficult almost impossible to be hunted by child with a gun. The squirrel is a small animal with thick hairy tail. It can be easily hunted by a child.

The flag (Figure 5) shows the Safohen with his rod, the squirrel, the antler with the child hanged in between its branched horns with the gun seized. The philosophy behind this proverb is that a child should not do things beyond his means. Cut your coat according to your size. The No.2 Asafo Company of Abaasa is implying that they are mighty and that no weaker individuals or groups should underrate them and attacks them. It a warning message to the opposing groups. If they know how to attack, they should choose the weaker groups but not the stronger group as the No2 Company.



Figure 6: *Nam a ne tsir atsew no,ne dzi ye dzi na*

The proverb literally translated as 'it is uncertain to eat a headless fish'. Fishes are identified mainly by the head. Without the head, it will be difficult to know the type of fish and whether it is safe or unsafe to use for meals. As seen in (Figure 6), a big headless fish with the head somewhere else and two men trying to identify which fish it was.

To the No.2 Asafo Company of *Abaasa*, this flag indicates that an Asafo company without a good strong leader is not worth dying for. Such an Asafo group is toothless and easy to conquer. It is a flag that is used to cast insinuation on the opposing groups. Philosophically, it also means that one should be wary about individuals or groups, which its identity is uncertain. Also, people should understand what an issue is before supporting or accepting it.



*Figure 7: Sɛ ɔkankan yim ekitsitsiw a, nnye ɔkanto nsoɛ ho bia*

Literally, this proverb is translated as 'if 'ɔkankan' can clean it anus on any plant, the 'ɔkanto' plant is an exception! 'ɔkankan' is relatively a small cat-like bush animal. It is believed that after going to toilet, it cleans its anus on anything it finds. 'ɔkanto' is a herbaceous plant with sharp thorns all over the stem. The (Figure 7) shows the ɔkankan with its anus on a thorny plant with blood flowing out of its anus. This flag teaches that you should look before you leap. Also you can fool someone some of the time but you cannot fool the people all the time. It is not everybody who can be cheated and go scot-free. The flag belongs to the Tuafo No.2 Asafo Company of Enyan Abaasa. They represent the 'ɔkanto' plant. Any opponent who attacks them is sure to be punished. They cannot be taken for a ride because of their superiority.



*Figure 8: Mbasiafo mpo na wɔabɔ ntoa yi, na mbanyin dze wɔnyɛ dɛn?*

The literal translation is 'Even women are combat ready what should the men do?' The Figure (8) shows three women in war attire. They are holding guns symbolising that they are combat ready. On the right side of the women is a man who is bare handed, meaning that he is not combat ready.

Philosophically, the proverb is interpreted that if men should fail, the women are ready to take up arms to defend the community. The flag is meant to motivate the men to stand up on their responsibilities. To the No.2 Asafo Company of Abaasa, the flag symbolises the readiness of both men and women to take up arms to defend the community when the need arises.



*Figure: 9 Ɔson tsia efir do a, onnhuan*

This is literally translated as 'When the elephant steps on a trap, the trap fails to function' the elephant is known to be the largest animal living in the forest. Traps are set in the bush to catch animals. When an animal steps on the trap, the trap functions automatically and catches an animal.

As shown (Figure 9), the flag shows an elephant that has stepped on a trap. But because of its weight and size, the trap fails to catch it. The elephant has so much power and control over the trap. Like the elephant, this philosophy explains the superiority of the Abaasa No.2 Asafo Company. They boast of their power and might and the difficult to conquer them. Another Akan proverb similar to this one states, 'mpɔntɔmpɔɔ botum ɔson yi men?' which literally translates 'Can the deep mud swallow the elephant?' In life, philosophy teaches about the need to respect authority. Give respect where it is due. Do not oppose when you know that you cannot do it.



Figure 10: *Sɛ isuo ɔwɔ ne tsir mu a, dza aka ne nyina ye ahoma*

The proverb literally translates, 'If the head of a snake is held, the remaining is an ordinary rope.' This proverb refers to the flag shown in Figure 10. It is known that the snake is a very poisonous reptile which most people fear its entire body. The flag shows a man, probably the 'Safohen', firmly holding the head of a big snake. According to the proverb, when the head of a snake is held, what remains is like an ordinary rope, which needs not to be feared because it is no more dangerous. The flag, basically, teaches about courage; courage to face issues fearlessly. The flag is an inspirational artefact, which urges the No.2 Asafo Company to push forward irrespective of the dangers ahead. It also shows that issues must be resolved with the right approach.



*Figure 11: Obiew kotompe, ɔbew w'ano kwa*

This translates as, 'A hard bone is chewed in vain'. The flag shows a dog with a big hard bone in its mouth. In front of the dog is another animal, rather bigger than the dog itself which appears to be expressing surprise at the dog in vain attempt to chew the hard bone. The flag shown in Figure 11 is owned by the No.2 Asafo Company of Enyan Abaasa. To the No.2 Asafo Company, though dogs chew bones, they fail to chew very hard bones. They only lick it and leave it. So like a hard bone, they can never be conquered. Philosophically, the flag is advising that you should not do things that you know you cannot do. On the other hand, it also symbolises that 'when the going is tough, it is only the tough that gets going.'



*Figure 12: Etsirasa, edze fa henfa nna morunnhu wo*

The literal translation is 'The three-headed dragon, I can see you from all angles.' The flag shown (Figure 12) belongs to the No.1 Asafo Company of Enyan Abaasa. The design simply shows a three headed dragon. The message is that, because of its three heads with six eyes, the dragon can see everything that goes on around it. The philosophy behind this is that, whatever you hide to do, there is always someone watching you. To the No.1 *Asafohen*, it implies that whatever any one does within the group or its environs he is capable of seeing it. To the *Asafo* Company itself, it symbolises vigilance.



Figure 13: *Tuwii*

Literally translates as 'The dragnet'. The flag as shown (Figure 13) was produced by the *Tufuhen* who heads the two *Asafo* companies. It shows a cast net being dragged by two groups of people from each side of the net. There are three people with the slightly fat and taller man standing between the other two. The fat and tall man wearing a hat is probably the *Tufuhen*. The other two carrying guns on their shoulders appear to be the *Asafohemfo* (sub chiefs). All the three men are half enclosed by the u-shaped formation of the net and the two groups of people dragging it. Unity and understanding is the philosophy behind it. It means that when the two Companies unite and rally behind the *Tufuhen*, there is no obstacle they cannot conquer, no matter how difficult it is. To the *Asafo* Companies, it means when there is unity; they can conquer their enemies and drag them like dragging nets.



Figure 14: *Samantan ne ba wɔmmfa no afo*

'It takes great courage to kidnap the babies of Samantan'. According to Akan mythology, Samantan is believed to be wild, fearful, and powerful human-like creature living in the forest. Like any other animals, when it brings forth its babies, it has a very strong and fearful protection for them and anyone who dares to take it babies is fiercely attacked.

The flag shown in (Figure 14) portrays the Samantan with it four babies, two of them sucking the long breast and the other two are on its shoulders. The flag belongs to the Tufuhen.

The philosophy behind this flag is that the Tufuhen, with the support by his Asafohemfo, have strong protection for the people in the community and that like the Samantan, no enemy will find it easy to disturb their peace. The Asafo companies guarantee protection for the community.

## Conclusion

The study identified two major types of Asafo flags, the first one which is not common and very long about three hundred feet long and four feet square normally carried in a snake-like procession or hanged on tall building called *Nsusuansu*. The second one is *Frankaa* with six feet width of four feet breadth which is mostly found around.

The Asafo flags impact positively on the socio-cultural lives of the people by creating a sense of pride and spirit of belongingness among the people. They are used to communicate the traditional and contemporary socio-cultural value of the people to other people outside the community, including foreigners. Asafo is a very formidable traditional militant organisation among the Akans (Fantes) including the people of



Enyan Abaasa. Besides performing the function of protecting or guiding towns and villages in the olden days, the Asafo Companies also contributed significantly toward promoting the socio-cultural values of the Akans through their songs, drumming, dances, costumes and especially the flags. The Asafo flags are used to perform social, cultural, spiritual and moral functions and to cast insinuations at neighbouring towns and villages, which bring about feuds, ethnic and civil wars. And also serving as a symbol of authority and identity, Asafo flags also preserve memories of significant events that the Asafo Company has passed through.

Most respondents of Enyan Abaasa who are youths have no idea about the symbolism of Asafo flags. They also have little or no idea at all about the philosophical meaning of the symbols used in designing the Asafo flags. This indicates the fact that the Asafo flags as seen around are not just flags but they go a long way to educate the youths of its importance, symbolism and philosophies that goes along with it.

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