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Talking Drums for Instruction in Alavanyo-Kpeme Basic Schools, Volta Region, Ghana

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Abstract



The study was based on the use of talking drums by Alavanyo-Kpeme basic schools for instructions, a practice which is the perpetuation of educational policy and preservation of Ghanaian culture. Using the descriptive research model, data was collected through observation and interviews with headteachers, teachers and pupils by interacting with them. The data collected was analyzed by aesthetic analysis. It is noted that talking drums communicate the embodiment portraying the interplay between music, communication and the social structure of the school system. The paper explains the perceptual qualities and the exhibition of the educational potency of the talking drums in Ghanaian schools.

Keywords: Talking drums, instruction, Volta Region, Wa, Alavanyo-Kpeme

1. Introduction

Embedded cultural education is fundamental to the basic, second-cycle, and Colleges of Education curriculum in Ghana. This complements the curriculum in training learners to fit into the communities they will work after school. Given the above the Curriculum Enrichment Programme was proposed in 1985 by the Ghana Education Service and was fully implemented in 1987. The policy was based on four main purposes that were to empower learners to:

- i. be proud of their country;
- ii. appreciate and value our culture;
- iii. feel the need to service others and contribute towards the improvement of their environment;
- iv. and be healthy and strong (CEP, 1985).

With the implementation of this policy in 1987, the talking drums were to replace bells in first-cycle, and second-cycle institutions and the teacher training colleges in Ghana to bid the schools to assembly, to signal both learners and teachers to change lessons and also to alert the school community about time to close (CEP, 1985). Although the policy was remarkable and welcomed by some stakeholders in education, it had its challenges such as the acquisition of the instruments, its maintenance, and the learners to handle them. However, amid the above challenges, Alavanyo-Kpeme basic schools embraced this policy and continued to use the talking drum as a medium of instruction till today. The perpetuation of educational policy and preservation of culture on their part are due to the following factors. Firstly, before the implementation of the CEP, drum language was one of the disciplines for the national cultural festival for both first and second-cycle schools (Mereku & Ohene-Okantah, 2007) which these schools train their learners to participate and therefore was ready for the implementation. In addition, the study was carried out to project the artisans such as drum carvers in Alavanyo-Kpeme who prepare and maintain the talking drum and lastly, the talking drum (*Ugã/Agblɔuu*) symbol is exposed in the work as one of the royal traditional ensembles of Alavanyo traditional area.

2. Review of Related Literature

The talking drum is a generic term for *Atumpan*, *Donno* and other musical instruments in Ghana. The *Atumpan* is a widely used instrument for sending information to far and near communities than the donno and other talking

drums as they are found in some dance ensembles in Ghana and other countries as supporting and master instruments. The discourse for this study is focused on the *Atumpan*. In Alavanyo traditional area and other Ewe-speaking communities in the Volta Region the talking drum is known as *ugā* or *Agbl u*. The Waala people call it *Tumpaani* (Gene & Chandi, 2022) and the Akan people call it *Atumpan* (Nketia, 1968). The talking drum belongs to the category of membranophones and has a goblet shape. Two hook sticks are used in playing them. The talking drum is paired, with one as a male and the other as a female. The male is placed on the right-hand side of the drummer and the female on the left side during a performance (Flolu et al., 2005). This arrangement is common with people with right-handedness and the southpaw sometimes changes the arrangement to suit their condition. The male produces low sound and the female high sound.



Fig. 1. The male (left) and the female (right) Atumpan/Ugā (talking drums)

The picture above shows the male and female talking drums with the male being the big drum on the right side and the female the small drum on the left side. Both instruments complement each other by passing information. The information that the drummers play on the talking drum is in syllables and words. For example, to play this Ewe proverb, *Nunya adidoe asi me tu ne o* (knowledge is infinite) some of the words are broken into syllables while others are presented a whole word as follows with *m*: representing male and *f*: female
 - *ffm m ffm ff m m m*

The tone of the texts goes with the sound of the representations - *Nu-nya a-di-do-e a-si me tu-ne o* as rhythmically noted in staff below:



Excerpt 1: Notation depicting two different sound positions of the talking drum

The illustration in excerpt 1 above is the order in which the drummer is going to play the sentence on the two drums to carry the message across. Hitherto, the drums were played by *Akyerema* (divine drummers) in the communities who were the only people who had the privilege to perform the instruments as they were owned by the chiefs and the fetish priests (Kemevor, 2014). The chief and the priests serve as mediators between the spiritual and the physical world. This therefore implies that the drummer occupies a spiritual position and serves as a link between the spiritual world and the physical world as he relays information to the ancestors during the performance of rituals hence a ritual was performed to usher him to that position. Gene and Chandi (2022) posited that a ritual is performed for the master drummer of the *Dugu* dance. The master drum for the *Dugu* dance is the *Tumpaani* (talking drum). Indeed, these were considered sacred instruments and therefore performed on special occasions such as the installation of chiefs, fetish priests/priestesses, and festivals. Nowadays talking drums are owned by schools, as purported by Gene (2022, p.20) that “The African Faith Tabernacle Church otherwise known as Nkansah Church”, and other institutions. Equally, no ritual is performed for the performers of the talking drum in these institutions as in the traditional realm, hence anyone who could play the instrument well is nominated to be in charge. There is also no restriction for the occasion on which it would be performed therefore it is played on any occasion at any time to give information, and praise chiefs and prominent people through the use of appellations and proverbs that are played by the drummer.

The main function of the talking drums in the olden days was to send information or communicate what transpired in a community internally or send it to other communities. According to Beltran (1974), the talking drum utilizes tones and rhythmic patterns through African text to disseminate information that represents speech. Information such as the installation of chiefs, the death of prominent persons in the community, and announcements of emergencies such as the breaking of war and an epidemic are disseminated through this medium. By far the dissemination of information through the talking drum was

and is still the most reliable, clear and straight to the point as compared to the use of gunshots and smoke from fire (Ushe, 2015). The information from the gunshot and the smoke are general.

The continued relevance of the talking drum to Alavanyo-Kpeme basic school as a medium of instruction and a conduit to entertainment during leisure time when classes are not in session comes with several benefits. Firstly, the practice inculcates in the pupils' values such as commitment which invariably compels them to uphold and practice their culture thereby preserving it and passing it to the subsequent generations. In assertion to this, Adjepong and Obeng (2018) reiterated that music contributes to the teaching and progress of children to accept, practice and perpetuate their culture. Even though this started in the communities, the continued use of the talking drum in the basic schools in Alavanyo-Kpeme complements what the pupils experience in the community. In addition, the performance of the talking drum enhances the physical development of the pupils. Through the playing of the drums, the drummers use their hands which is a fine motor skill and therefore the movement enhances the heartbeat and improves healthy living. The other pupils who dance to the music also exercise their bodies and hence become healthy as posited by Acquah, Anderson, and Donkor (2020) that the exhibition of different types of movements strengthens the muscles and puts some level of activity on the heart to beat. Aside from the health benefits that pupils derive from the performance of the talking drums, the drum language likewise improves their speech and auditory sensitivity, makes them alert to instruction, and gives feedback during lessons in class and a conversation. In support of this, Hallam (2017) is of the view that there is an indication that the more you engage in music-making the more you increase your hearing capabilities, and this benefits musicians for musical sound production and speech.

3. Methodology

The work was placed within the descriptive research model which has espoused contextual and field methods to collect data. A fieldwork account and explanation of activities related to music concerning context ought to throw more light on music in ethos as new ideas and skills are gained (Nketia, 2005). In effect, the contextual method gave room for the investigator to mingle with the participants to witness the music performance. Certainly, observation was the required tool for researching the use of traditional musical instruments for instruction and communication. This was to ascertain how it was performed

and the features that contributed to the perpetuation of educational policies and the preservation of Ghanaian culture in Alavanyo-Kpeme basic schools as other institutions reverted to the use of bells and sirens. The researcher combined the contextual study with the music performance. With this attention was paid to the meaning of the languages performed on the drum to the literal and contextual meanings and the other occasions on which the pupils perform the *Ugã* music. Kerman (1985), however, believed that the contextual study diverts attention from the music and focuses on the occasions of performance or contexts. Departing from Kerman's view on the contextual approach, Stone (2008) welcomed the idea with the empowerment of the framework to musical occasions. The researcher, therefore combined the two approaches to avoid biases and also to gain more insight into the context and the content of the music performance.

In effect, data was gathered from the pupils playing the instruments, the teachers, and the headteachers of the two schools. The pupils were contacted because they performed the instruction they received from the teachers and the headteacher on the instruments. The teachers on the other hand were involved in the data collection because they instructed the pupils on what to perform and also the proper upkeep of the instruments. The headteachers took part in the data collection as they are the general overseers of the school and monitor all the activities. Through observation and interaction, I interviewed them on the acquisition, use and maintenance of the instruments. The information gathered was examined taking into consideration the literal and contextual meanings of the languages performed on the instruments and analyzed by the aesthetic analysis in which the use of artistic and sensory qualities of the occasions on which the schools performed the *Ugã* music apart from using it for instruction was discussed as well.

4. Discussion of Findings

Alavanyo-Kpeme basic schools are made up of Evangelical Presbyterian Kindergarten, Evangelical Presbyterian Primary and Roman Catholic Junior High Schools. The Kindergarten and the Primary are together at the same premise while the Junior High school shares a common boundary with the two schools. The primary department has its drums same as the Junior High department. Kindergarten, however, does not have drums for instruction. The learners in this department would rather take instruction directly from their teachers as they are young and therefore might be unable to understand the drum language.

The funding for the acquisition of the drums was sourced from internally generated funds and the capitation grant. According to Esia-Donkoh (2014), the procurement of the instrument was the prerogative of the headteacher of the school in consultation with the teachers and other stakeholders of the school. He state, "The procurement officer to administer school purchases, account for school monies and properties, and keep the school's administration running smoothly" (p.68). A duty the headteacher performed solely or delegated a teacher to perform or was assisted in its performance. The same processes and sources are resorted to in the maintenance of the instruments when they are not in good condition.

The handling and care for the instruments are the responsibilities of the drummer(s) to be coordinated by the teacher responsible for that schedule as opined by Dampson and Frempong (2018) that "distributed leadership is primarily concerned with shared, collective and extended leadership that builds the capacity for change and improvement is the key to effective practices in schools" (p.2). A position that the headteacher authorized the teacher responsible to occupy as a shared responsibility for the smooth running of the school so that the headteacher will coordinate all the activities. He or she monitors the activities of the drummer(s) regularly by the school rules and regulations about the handling of the instruments. The drummer(s) on the other hand carry out the routine practices such as bringing the drums out from where they are kept, cleaning them when they become dirty, tuning them to get the appropriate sound and placing them at the right place and position such that the resonator, the skin, the rope holding the pegs in position and the pegs may not be affected by the weather, termites or rodents. When the drums are spoilt, the headteacher invites the drum carver who also maintains them to haggle over the maintenance fee. If consensus is reached then the pupils send the drums for repairs and when done, they go for them from the repairer's shop.

The selection of the drummers is not based on any strict criteria. Mostly, the learners who come to school regularly and can play the instruments well are selected to be in charge. These selection principles are related to Nketia (1988) as cited in Gene and Chandi (2022) that signing up performers is important to musical groups where several roles of the groups are allocated to experts who may be law-abiding and time-conscious. Sometimes two pupils are supposed to be in charge of the drums in each academic year but in the event of the two being absent any other pupil can take the oversight responsibility to play the drums. No formal training is organized for the wannabe drummer(s). They

learn how to play the drums through observation, emulation and application (Adjepong, 2020). They attain these when the pundits in the community perform the *Agblɔvu/Uga* (talking drum) ensemble during festivals and other life-cycle events such as the funeral of the chiefs and other prominent people in the community. Those who have experience playing drums by joining the *Bɔbɔɔbɔ* group and the musical groups at church play different membranophones including the Donno (hourglass drum) which is also a talking drum. They transfer these experiences to playing the *Ugã/Agblɔvu* at school. They achieve this by observing how it is done and also practicing during leisure time at school.

Below are the drum languages for Junior High and Primary School and the contexts in which they are used in Ewe language and translated into the English language.

Table 1: Junior High School Drum Language

Ewe	English
<i>Ɖoɖui nezi</i>	Silent period
<i>Mi foƒu</i>	Assemble/Gather
<i>Ha dɔme sɛ ha ku ati ke</i>	Break
<i>Mitrɔ gbɔ</i>	Break over

Table 2: Primary School Language

Ewe	English
<i>Mi dogo va trĩ</i>	Morning assembly
<i>Mi dogo via ɖe</i>	First break/short break
<i>Mi geɖe xɔme</i>	Break over
<i>Ha dɔme sɛ ha ku ati ke</i>	Second break/ long break
<i>Ɖeviwo game sũ mi dzudzɔ nu sɔsrɔ</i>	Closing time

The difference in the drum languages for the two departments is attributed to two reasons. Firstly, the two schools are in the same vicinity and learners and teachers follow the drum language's instructions. Secondly, if they play the same drum language for both, it would confuse them if they are far from the compound and there is an emergency situation in one of the schools. These two reasons called for separate drum languages that have similar meanings in different contexts.

The drum languages for the two departments above have linguistic elements that help the learners to enrich their language such as the semantics which aids them in getting the literal and the context in which drum languages are used. According to Doyle (2007), "context affects meaning" (p.4), as the information that is disseminated may have a purpose and cultural connotation beyond the literal meaning as pertains to the information in the drum languages of the two departments of the Alavanyo-Kpeme basic schools such as *Ha d me sē ha ku ati ke*. This means "if a pig is satisfied that it digs roots" which implies that when learners are hungry, they cannot learn; therefore, when they go out for a break, they will eat and regain their strength. The purpose as a context helps the learners go by instruction and perform duties on time, as the cultural implication is hinged on the acquisition and use of proverbs and idioms of the local dialect as portrayed in the command and instruction. The cultural aspect further applies to the utilization of music as a medium of communication to convey information and instruction to learners and invariably encourages learners to accept, practice and uphold their cultural values.

For one to get the contextual meaning of a language, the person is supposed to understand it first then this will be followed by the contextual meaning as in the drum languages of Alavanyo-Kpeme basic schools and proposed by Abuarrah (2018) that literal connotation is primary while context is ensuing; with both complementing each to avail meaning in the implicit and explicit discourse. This is the situation in the two schools where learners discern meaning from drum language which enriches the perceptual experience that invariably aids them in the aural and oral aspects of learning. To add to the above, Falkum (2021) suggested that, "to become competent communicators, children have to learn how to bridge the gap between literal meanings and speaker meanings in context" (p.98). The interaction and the information gathered from the pupils that handle the instruments and others indicated that they understand the Ewe language played on the talking drum anywhere they go but the other languages performed on them, they do not understand. Below are the literal and contextual connotations of the drum languages of both departments translated into English.

Table 3: The literal and contextual meanings of the drum languages of Alavanyo-Kpeme basic schools

Ewe	English (Literal Meaning)	English Contextual Meaning
Ɖoqui nezi	Silence should prevail	Silent period
Mi fofu	Gather	Assemble/Gather
Ha dome sē ha ku ati ke	If a pig is satisfied that it digs roots	Break time
Mitro gbo	Come back	Break over
Mi dogo va trī	Come out and form a queue	Assemble/Gather
Mi dogo via ɔe	Come out a while	Break time
Mi geɔe xome	Enter the room	Break over
Ɖeviwo game sū mi dzudzɔ nu sɔsɔ	Children it is time to stop learning	Closing time

Apart from keeping time and giving instructions in the two schools, the pupils also use the talking drums to entertain themselves on the days that classes are not in session during their leisure time. The drummers on these occasions play some of the *Fɔntɔmfrɔm* rhythmic patterns as well as the *Akpi* patterns. It is on these occasions too that the pupils who are willing to play and do not have the opportunity to also practice how to play the drums. Another context in which the talking drum is performed by the pupils is during the national cultural festival for basic schools. One of the disciplines of this event is the drum language. Before the event, two or more pupils are selected and trained on how to play some appellations, idioms and proverbs on the drums. These pupils are accompanied by a pupil who recites or reads the texts the drummer is supposed to play. During the competition, the pupil selected to represent the school plays what he learned as the pupil who accompanies him recites, or reads for him to play. One of the panel members as well reads or recites some of the sentences for him to play. The drummer ties a piece of cloth around the waist with the chest bare or puts on a singlet, while the one who recites or reads for him to play might decide to be in school uniform or dress like the drummer. This is normally done on a competition base and the pupil that becomes first will proceed to the district level and if he excels there too will proceed to the regional level and national level.

The researcher's experience revealed that there were other drum languages about instruction in schools in the Volta Region apart from the ones in use in Alavanyo-Kpeme basic schools. That is when he was in Secondary School

between 1989-1994 and in the Teachers' Training College between 1995-1998. Talking drums were used in these institutions during those years and the drum languages were the same as those of the basic schools and the other ones not currently played by the Alavanyo-Kpeme basic schools. This might be so perhaps because the school is not a boarding school and therefore the drum languages about getting up in the morning and the one relating to lights out in the night when it is time to go to bed might not apply to them.

Table 4: Other drum languages in the Ewe language for instruction in schools in the Volta between 1989-1998

Ewe	English (literal meaning)	English (contextual meaning)
<i>Agu dze mi fo</i>	The sun has risen wake up	Wake up
<i>Yeyiyia trɔ mi trɔ de ɲu</i>	Time has changed, go by the time	Change of lesson
<i>Ahom tu, mi va</i>	The wind has blown, come	There is an emergency, gather
<i>Zã do</i>	It is night	Lights out/Go to bed

5. Conclusion

The use of the Uugã/Agblɔu (talking drum) as a medium of instruction in Alavanyo-Kpeme basic schools as a medium of instruction is distinguishing as it exposes the pupils to the way of life of Alavanyo people. In effect, the school is preserving the culture of the Alavanyo people by passing it on to the young ones which will help the genre to be sustained. To add to that, it is the perpetuation of educational policy that started in 1987 which is worthy of emulation by other schools that abandoned it for the use of bells and sirens. Aside from using the instruments for instruction, pupils during leisure perform them to entertain themselves in effect they socialize and interact with each other.

One notable aspect of the Uugã/Agblɔu (talking drum) is the transmission of spoken discourse musically with tones and rhythm to transmit information to pupils. With this, the pupils' perceptive qualities have been broadened as they directly, and indirectly acquire music skills such as oral and aural skills. Another aspect of information transmission is the understanding of the message that is put across as it may have contextual and literal connotations that pupils are able to decode to go by instruction thereby enriching their language. For this policy to come to fruition and sustained to date was due to the vibrant social structure of the Alavanyo-Kpeme basic schools from its inception till date. The headteachers of the schools from 1987 till date demonstrated a democratic

system of presiding, therefore, consulting and delegating teachers and other stakeholders to acquire, maintain, and replace the instruments has been feasible. It is this synergy and collaboration that sustained the use of *Uugã/Agbluu* as a medium of instruction in the two schools which is well-intentioned to emulate. It is therefore recommended that the government should reintroduce the policy to use the talking drum as a medium of instruction in the schools that have small compounds and those that have big compounds should use it to supplement the sirens and also to perform it on special days and occasions.

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