

Artistic Evolutions of the Ga Mashie Twins Yam Festival and Its Cultural Implications

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Abstract

The ethnographic study revealed the artistic evolutions and cultural implications of the celebration of the Twins Yam Festival which is a quintessential pre-celebration rite during the annual *Homowo* festival of the Ga ethnic race in Ghana. The festival encompasses the philosophical, psychological, religious and socio-economic activities of the Ga and unites the people. According to oral tradition, the Twins Yam festival was initially not observed as a cultural heritage of the people. The study therefore investigated how the Twin Yam festival came to be with the annual celebration of the *Homowo* festival and its importance in the cultural sustainability of this indigenous area. It furthermore discusses the roles of the various art forms which are actively involved in the rituals, making the celebration such a significant phenomenon. Participatory observation of the rites and well structured interviews were the main instruments used in divulging data from respondents. The study revealed that the twins festival religiously honours the spirits of the twins and imbues into them confidence to attain self fulfilment and psychological peace. In addition, during the celebration, services of the hospitality and culinary or gastronomy industries increase and financial gains do double.

Keywords: Ga Mashie, Twins, festival, priest, art and culture.

Introduction

The Ga occupy the south eastern corner of Ghana known as the Accra Plains excluding the Volta Delta (Kilson, 1974). The most important festival for the Ga is *Homowo* which literally means hooting at hunger (Salm and Falola, 2002). Before the climax of the celebration mostly in the month of August, there are pre-celebrating activities which characterize this cultural heritage of the people. Among the pre-celebrating activities is the honouring of twins in the traditional families which the Ga consider as the 'birthday' for all twins. However, the Nai Wulomo (Chief Priest of Ga Mashie) opined that according to oral tradition, the birth of twins to a Ga family was an abomination and a sign of bad luck and therefore are subsequently killed. In this vein, the birth of twins requires the performing of rituals. According to Field (1961), although twins are divine and held never to bring ill fortune to a family, they bring so much anxiety to their parents that they are never welcomed. It is therefore expedient for this study to give an account on how the Ga now receive the birth of twins with panache and celebrate a festival to honour their twins.

The Twin celebration is a yam festival and for this reason yam is the main crop used in preparing food for them. It is interesting to note that the Encyclopaedia of Ethics and Religion (1937) points out that, the tribes of Niger celebrate the Yam harvest by a feast to which everyone contributes a fowl. The authors also cite the celebration of the yam harvest of the Yoruba in which all the celebrants partake of the new yam and quantities of vegetable food as an example; whilst in Fiji great feasts are said to take place at the time of the presentation of the first fruits of the yams to the ancestral spirits. In this domain, it serves as a means of commemorating and remembering significant events in the history of a people. One gateway to remembering the significant event and understanding the past is through the arts of one's culture.

The study mainly gives an account of the Ga Mashie Twins Yam festival in Accra and discusses the artistic evolutions and cultural implications of the celebration. It critically assesses the significance and the importance of the arts and the other cultural aspects during the celebration of this august festival

which other writers seems to have ignored when it comes to the appreciation of the cultural heritage of the people. The celebration of Twins Yam festival by the Ga Mashie involves a great deal of art and other cultural aspects. These artistic aspects are a whole complex of distinctive, spiritual, religious, psychological and emotional features that characterize the entire traditional area during the celebrations. The celebration of the festival includes all the modes of life, value systems and beliefs and it is the artistic and other cultural aspects that serve as a vehicle for this festival to achieve its focal objective which is to unite the people. Cole and Ross (1977) confirm that festivals are perhaps the country's most significant richest art forms. These ritually based, multimedia, socio-political events have sometimes been called a unified work of art. Ammah (1982) lends his voice that the Twin Yam festival is a representation of art.

The above assertions portray that the celebration of the festival embodies a lot of artistic creations and has other cultural implications. These artistic creations and other cultural aspects help the celebrants and observers to understand the significance of the celebration of the festival. The researcher has come to realise the fact that the artistic and other cultural aspects of the Twins Yam festival are almost completely overlooked when it comes to the analysis and appreciation of the cultural heritage of the Ga. These situations therefore create a fertile ground for the study on the celebration and the artistic and other cultural implications of the festival to be brought to light.

Furthermore, the Twins Yam festival which is celebrated annually with pomp and pageantry has shown a remarkable capacity for survival in spite of socio-cultural influences. Also, the influx of technological advancement and other religious bodies necessitate the need for documentation of this cultural heritage for posterity. During its celebration, the arts of the people are displayed, however, the youth or most people who participate, observe and read about the festival may not know the significance of the celebration, its arts and other cultural values involved in the celebration of the festival.

Methodology

This ethnographic study focused on the significance of the Twins Yam festival and its artistic evolutions, its origination and contribution to the development of the Ga cultural heritage. The study was conducted and the various rituals observed at the palaces and shrines of the two principal priests of the Ga Mashie; The Nai Wulomo and the Sakumo Wulomo (Wulomo is the Ga name for a priest). Principally, the spotlight was placed on the artistic evolutions of the celebration which to the present researcher carry the celebration to achieve its main objective. Also, the significance and the philosophical underpinnings of the rites were also revealed. Data were collected from the custodians of the rites and heads of families represented at the palaces and shrines of the priests through interviews and observation. Five out of six key conditions in choosing appropriate research strategies closely relate to the dichotomy between the use of the positivist and social constructive approaches, (Easterby-Smith, *et al.*, 2002). Again, according to Brewer (2004) in a study of people to capture social meaning, involves the researcher participating directly in the setting. In this vein, the author conducted participatory observation and structured interviews which served as the primary data and literary sources from other writers served as the secondary data for the study.

Results and Discussion

The origin of the Twins Yam festival

As already mentioned, the Twins Yam festival was initially not part of the peoples' cultural heritage. All twins delivered in the traditional area were killed because the people had the belief that they were signs of bad ill. (Nuumo Tete, the Nai Wulomo, personal interview, August, 2006) All indigenes of the land succumbed to this maltreatment until the wife of Nii Okaija (Chief of Gbese, one of the seven quarters of Ga Mashie) delivered very vigorously healthy male identical twins. The chief being aware of the taboo absconded with the babies for obvious reason of not wanting them killed. According to Nii Yartey Yarboi, head of Aplaku family who did not provide the exact time this happened, Nii Okaija was naturally full of love and compassion for his twins. For this matter, with the help of a few of his subjects, they pitched tent for the babies in the central region of Ghana, but he later returned to his people. He sent money periodically for their upkeep. Again, according to the informant, after several years, the twins who had grown to teenagers decided to visit their father and it was said that they arrived on a Friday, a day before the climax of the *Homowo* celebration. The striking identities of Nii Okaija's twins were admired by all including the very rulers of the traditional area. This brought about

series of consultation with the gods and ancestors of the land. Having consulted their gods, it was agreed that the killing of twins be abrogated and replaced with the celebration of a yam festival to honour twins during the *Homowo* festival.

Why Yam and not Corn?

The author's contention here is that *Homowo* is a corn festival and for this reason corn must be used in preparing food for the celebration of the Twins festival. However, Yam is used in preparing food for the celebration. According to Nuumo Tete who is the Chief Priest, the Ga believe that it takes a hardworking person to cultivate this crop. In this regard, the people are reiterating the fact that hard work is the key to success. The crop has therefore been attached to people celebrating their birthday. It is in this light that, yam came to be with the twins festival which was considered as a birthday for all twins. From the findings, it could also be deduced that the attachment of yam to the twins celebration was to place emphasize on their rites and differentiate it from the august corn harvest *Homowo* festival. Anquandah (1982) explained that yam farming evolved during the later stages of the Stone Age when stone hoes and obviously required hard working pair of hands to cultivate.

The celebration and significance

The Twins Yam festival begins early on Friday morning in all the respective compounds where twins are residing. Traditionally, the Nai Wulomo (the chief priest) is the first to prepare the *baawoo* (concoctions) before the various houses where twins reside can take their turn. This is necessary since the onus lies on him to seek permission on behalf of all twins of the traditional area from the gods. The Nai Wulomo (Chief Priest) dressed in white apparel begin by reciting artistic prayers while his retinue respond *Hiao!, Hiao!, Hiao!* meaning, "May it be so". After the prayers, libation is performed and poetic words and lyrical expressions also believed to win admirations from the spirit of the gods are recited. A tuber of yam (*Dioscorea rotundata*) is cut into small pieces and placed at all entry and exit points of the shrine believed to invoke the benevolent spirits to the ceremony.

According to the Nai Wulomo, the herbs used in the preparation of the twins concoction are of seven different kinds namely *ntonme* (*Dracaena arborea*) *hii abaa*, *nyanyara* (*Momordica charantia*), *adibli*, *adwere* (*Portulaca oleracae*), *tsalai and too lilei*. As the chief priest recites some prayers and sings, he carefully mixes these herbs with sea water, schnapps and eggs. This *baawoo* (concoction) is prepared in an artistic bowl called *tsese* and the concoction is believed to induce fertility. Interestingly, in the Ga culture the egg is used to symbolize fertility. Sarpong (1974) clearly indicate that a symbolic object which is associated with fecundity and easy labour in Ghanaian culture is the egg of the domestic hen. Sarpong further argued that

The egg is laid by the hen with what the Ghanaian considers to be amazing ease; it is therefore made to symbolize easy labour and fecundity. For these reasons the egg is employed time and again for sacrifices, at purificatory rites, as pacification fees, as gifts, in thanksgiving after sickness on many occasions (p.123).

The chief priest ends the entire rituals by offering prayers on behalf of the Head of State of Ghana, all war afflicted countries, workers of the state, school children and all persons in the world. He then sacrifices two white fowls, slaughtering them one after the other. The priest recites prayers and throws each slaughtered fowl backwards and the manner in which the fowl falls is very significant. The process is repeated if both fowls fall on their bellies which would be a sign of bad omen till at least one of them lies on its back. This is done upon an appeal by the priest to the gods to forgive them of their shortcomings. A goat is also sacrificed in the inner chamber of the priest's shrine and the blood applied to the doorposts of the building to ward off evil spirits. This is biblical and cognate to the Jewish Passover, hence, the people believe they are protected from evil and bad omen (Nuumo Ogbaami, Sakumo Wulomo, personal interview, August, 2006).

The chief priest purifies himself with the concoctions made in the *tsese*. He dips both hands and sips the concoction into his mouth. He spits it out three times and washes the back of the ears, the face, knee and feet with the belief that he has purified himself. Celebrants come from all walks of life to purify themselves and ask for fertility and fecundity. The significance of the purification is believed by the

priest that when you cleanse yourself with the concoction after the narration all your problems, you will be purified and have solutions to the problems especially those with difficulty of having children.

Afterwards the meat of the fowls, the goat and the yam are used to prepare a special meal called *fotoli*. *Fotoli* is believed to be the special meal of the gods and the food is sprinkled at the shrine of the priest to feed the gods. After the sprinkling rite, the *fotoli* meal is eaten communally and during that period, all social statuses are in abeyance. This comes to justify one of the objectives of their cultural heritage that is oneness and camaraderie. Opoku (1972) asserted that the eating of the festive food involves scrambling over fish or meat with father or son begging each other for a morsel or fish. The women also share in the fun as they cheer and applaud the smartness of the youth as they overtake the older folk in the struggle. From this statement, it is safe to assert that one needs to be really fast to get a better part of the food and although the older folks are the providers of the money for the meal, they all need to scramble for the food especially the fish or meat. This comes to establish the social appraisal of the festival where the celebrants are reminded that they are of one common stock and therefore with one goal.

Between 16 hours to 17.30 GMT, the hull of the yams that were used in preparing the *fotoli* are gathered into the concoction in the *tseese* and a volunteer carries it to the sea side to cast it away on behalf of all twins of the Ga traditional area. The twins are besmeared with white clay and powder to signify victory, purity, joy and longevity. They are also carried shoulder high by volunteers who follow the *tseese* (traditional bowl) carriers. Singing and chanting characterize the procession as shown in figure 1.

Furthermore, an intense drama unfolds when the carriers of the *tseese* seem to be possessed and moves in an uncontrollable and frenzied manner. The climax of this drama is reached when the carriers from different households seem to be wrestling against the *tseese*. They sometimes wrestle with other *tseese* carriers. According to Nii Larkote, the *brafo* in the *Nai We* (The family house of the Nai Wulomo), the herbs that are carried are very powerful and the carriers wrestle against each other to release the tension in them (See Figure 2). The Ga, like other Africans, believe that both animate and inanimate objects have what is called the “vital force” or “life force” on which human beings depend for daily survival and continuity. Therefore, they believe that the combination of the herbs can influence the carriers of the *tseese* to wrestle with one another (Nuumo Blafo, Ga Blafo Wulomo, personal communication, 2006). It must be noted that the vital force or life force has two aspects namely the spiritual and the physical, and the physical aspects have been well established by scientists.

God has endowed man with power, intelligence and knowledge to obtain these herbs and use them in curing sicknesses and it is no wonder that the cinchona tree can treat malaria and *nyanyara* (*Momordica charantia*), one of the herbs for the concoction has also become the panacea for many convulsion diseases. Djagbletey (1972) asserts that some plants are believed to be able to draw out magical powers from the atmosphere and plants of this nature are used for religious and yam festivals. Djagbletey further indicates that the *nyanyara* herb is the official attire of the priestesses. *Nyanyara* (*Momordica Charantia*) is used by the twins and the priests and priestesses to increase their natural or individual powers for the task of communication with the astral forces. During the procession the people sing the chorus:

Ga

Yee, ye yee, yeyee
Akwele suma
Akuoko omasu
Tawia Appiajei
Nyankuma Ago
Abam Hele
Mi tee lanmashi, miya na wuo
Mina wuo, mijo foi,
Mijo foi aahu, mikwo tso,
Mi ko tso aahu, mi kpeleke shi
Mi kpeleke shi Akwele
Mi kpeleke shi Akuoko

Translated as

The spirit of Akwele
The spirit of Akuoko
and Tawiah Appiajei
Nyankoma Ago also and Aban
I went to Lanmashi, and saw a swarm of bees
I run away having seen the swarm of bees
I climbed a tree afterward
After sometime, I descended from the tree
I descended Akwele
I descended Akuoko

(Akwele, Akuoko are names of female twins. Tawiah Appiajei, Ago and Aban are names given to siblings born after twins)



Fig. 1 Twins being carried shoulder high during the haajii yele yeli procession



Fig. 2: *Tsese* carriers on their way to the dumping site

Some artistic evolutions of the celebration

Tsese (The traditional bowl)

The role of the visual arts in the celebration of the *Homowo* festival cannot be over emphasized. Throughout the festival, the artistic objects found in the celebration of the festival are all visual artefacts. One important visual art is the *tsese*, the traditional wooden bowl. This wooden artefact permeates throughout the celebration. This traditional bowl which is delicately designed by the artist is the receptacle for the concoctions and becomes highly functional during the procession to the dumping site. Without the study of its cultural and religious concepts, an observer may not be able to comprehend the whole concept of this artefact and may either ignore its use or miss its function in the celebration. Macquet (1986) affirms this argument by saying that

Experiencing is always a mental process, whether it is triggered by an external stimulus or by an idea...what we experience is mental. This conclusion is of crucial importance in our analysis of symbols. When looking at a physical object [visual artefacts] Modrian's grid, the golden light or the porphyry sarcophagus- which is an external stimulus, we have mental experience of what symbolizes order, life, or extremity. Symbols are different from other signs in that they are partly what they stand for. Thus, when mentally apprehending, the beholder is connected with the signified. Beyond intellectual knowledge, the beholder achieves understanding as a result of participating in an experience (p. 72).

Therefore in appreciating the importance of the *tsese* (traditional bowl) one should not look at its intrinsic qualities alone but its symbolic and philosophical use as well. This implies that the people believe that the mere sight of the bowl imbues confidence and the assurance of answers to their predicaments.

Music

The music produced during the celebration would be clearly understood if one really understands the importance of these religious celebrations. Kamien (1998) argues along the same line as

Music is not created in a vacuum. To fully understand the style of a composition, one has to be aware of its function in society. Is a piece meant to provide entertainment in an aristocrat castle, a concert hall, a middle class home? Is it designed to accompany singing, dancing, religious rites or drama? Musical style is shaped by political, economic, social and intellectual. (p. 59).

From this point by Kamien, it could be deduced that one has to be aware of the music that is being produced and its significance, to whom it is made and why it is being produced. Hitherto to this discussion, it could be seen that it is not only the application of singing and drumming that makes the music really artistic; it is a combination of the quality of the words or libretto produced, the quality of the voice, the dexterity and frenzied mood of the drummers and the desired harmony that the music achieves which in effect draws the benevolent spirits into its medium, and which inspires connoisseurs to categorize it as a great work of art.

During the celebration, it is realized that the songs produced by the celebrants are the call and response form of singing. It is also known as the cantor-chorus style of singing and these styles of singing permeate any other African societies. In the Ga culture, the *lalatse* (the leader of the songs) is referred to as the cantor. This cantor-chorus style of singing is heard in the performing of the various rites of the twins festival. During this celebration, the cantor-chorus style of singing although employed the song starts with a chord and ends also with a chord as evident in Notation 1. The festival song that is sung during the procession known as *Ye Ye Ye* has been transcribed into score. This is to enable all people who have musical knowledge to sing along. It is also a way of preserving our cultural songs for posterity.

GA MASHIE TWINS YAM FESTIVAL NOTATION

arranged by S. Nortey



The celebration of the festival brings into focus stupendous artistic creations. All the various forms of art assist to sustain and make the festival enjoyable, captivating and educative. It is during the celebration of the twins festival and other important ceremonies that the artefacts which until that time perceived as static art forms in the various places are transformed into kinetic arts. Thompson (1974) termed it as “art in motion”. This means the arts become highly functional. For example the *tsese* (traditional bowl) is also carried by a person in a trance and this helps them to radiate tremendous touch and charm to the festival occasion. The *tsese* is said to be in kinetic state since it is always observed to be at the entrance of the shrines of the various priests and it is seen in motion during the *Haaji Yele Yeli* (Twins Yam Festival) procession (see figure 1).

All ceremonies in the celebration of the festival are believed to be in connection with supernatural protective spirits and these activities largely employ music as it is through the music that the benevolent spirits are thought to be drawn to their mediums to perform their duties. Since sounds are made by musical instruments, singing or a combination of both is music, it could be said that the artistic manner in which the retinue of the chief priest clap their hands in response to his prayers is music and thus an artistic creation. According to Nii Larkote the *brafo* (executioner) in *Nai We* (the chief Priest palace), the clapping signifies that “May it be so” which is probably equivalent to “Amen” that Christians say in response to their prayers. This form of clapping is however different from the usual one where the palms of both hands are struck together to produce a sound. In this case, the palm of the left hand is opened upward with the fingers bent inside to make a fist, and the palm of the right hand is used to strike the fist of the left hand, thus producing a very soft sound. This brings into focus outstanding artistic creations. It could therefore be asserted that without the singing, clapping, dancing and in fact the making of music, the entire celebration would be monotonous, unattractive and aesthetically unpleasant.

Cultural Implications

Culturally, the celebration of the festival also brings about seasonal employment in the micro economy of the Ga traditional area. This is noted clearly on the *Haaji Yele Yeli* (Twins Yam Festival) day when the leaves for the preparation of *baawoo* (concoction) are sold at the market especially at the *Salaga* Market in Accra. This provides temporal employment to some of the people. Also, the involvement of all manners and categories of people has its economic implications in various forms. The entire celebration including the processions is observed by all and sundry; services are provided by the hospitality and culinary or gastronomy industries; and tourism is boosted. In short, services, production of goods, commercial activities and financial gains do double during the celebration.

Apart from the economic wealth that the celebration brings to the people, their various activities also portray their cultural identity and togetherness. The poetic prayers and sayings, traditional costumes worn which are all indicative of the hierarchical position of the wearer to a very large extent portray the cultural identity of the people and let people experience culture at its best.

Medicinally, the vigorous processions that follow the *tse* carriers during the celebration serve as exercises for the celebrants. The celebrants sweat profusely during these activities and they burn excessive fats from their bodies. This activity serves as a great deal of exercise which helps in the circulation of blood in the veins and arteries as well as prevent heart and cardiac illnesses Vanhecke, *et al.*, (2006) confirms that lack of exercise and obesity pandemic are major causes of cardiovascular diseases in adolescents. Psychologically, since the concoction made by the priests is believed to induce fertility and fecundity, the celebrants who go through the cleansing rite do get the positive thinking that they would bear a child in the coming year.

Conclusion

The celebration of the festival with the view of honouring twins from the traditional area is indeed worthy of celebrating. The findings on how the festival came to be part of the cultural heritage are indeed import, interesting and educative. The study has revealed the attachment of yam instead of corn which is the staple crop of the people as not only capable of invoking the spirits of the gods but also encourages hardwork. The study has also shown that it has enormous significance in the culture of the people in that tourism is boosted with the influx of visitors. Besides, Gas, Ghanaians in general and foreigners are all involved in one way or the other in this sacred activity of the people. The celebration of the twins festival imbues into the celebrants confidence to attain self fulfilment and psychological peace. The study has shown that art among the various aspect of Ga culture is the most significant phenomenon that fuels the success of the twins festival. Without the arts and other aspects of the culture, it would be absolutely impossible to celebrate the festival. It serves as a time that the priests and the people showcase their cultural wealth and religiosity and as Mbiti (1990) indicated, the festival also brings together the people, thus strengthening their unity and cohesion.

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